

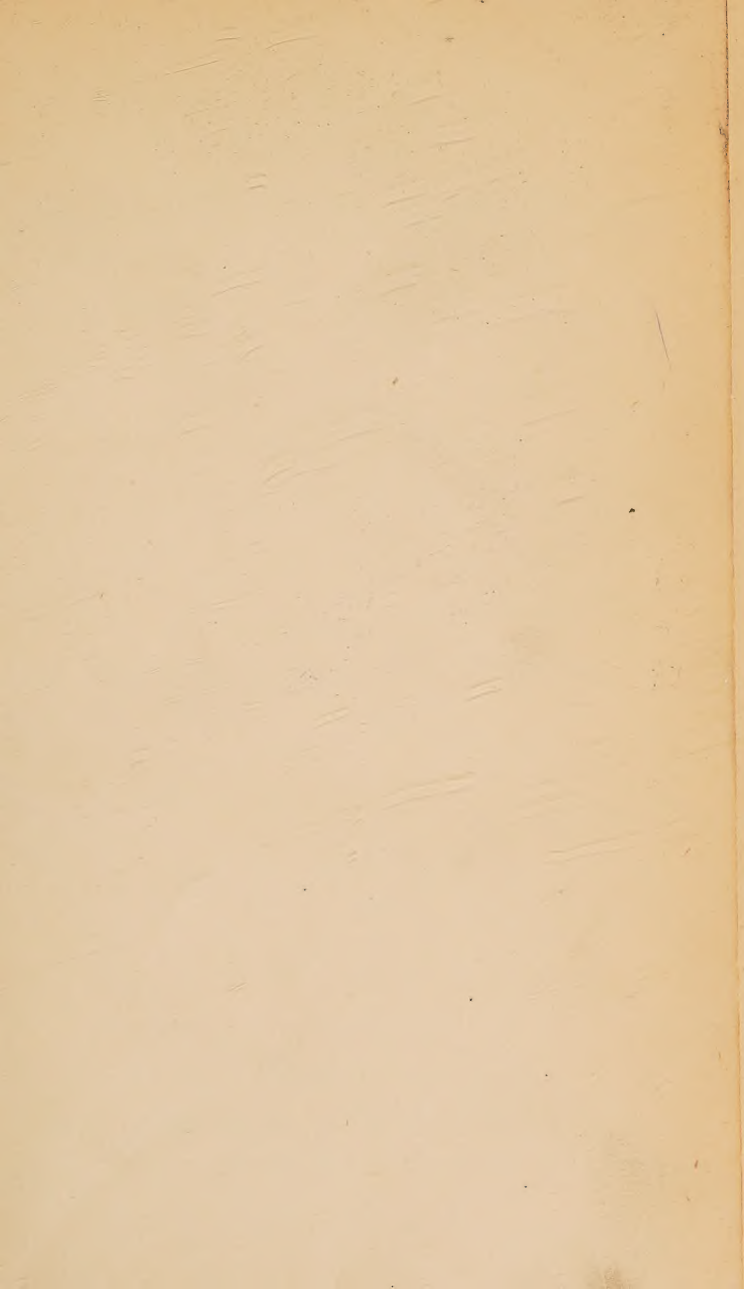
SISTER NATALIE

BY
MRS. CRAVEN.

TRANSLATED BY

LADY GEORGIANA FULLERTON

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NATALIE NARISCHKIN,

Sister of Charity of St. Vincent of Paul.

BY

MRS. AUGUSTUS CRAVEN,

AUTHOR OF "A SISTER'S STORY."

TRANSLATED BY

LADY GEORGIANA FULLERTON.

"UBI CHARITAS, IBI DEUS."

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SCHOLASTICATE,
Pittsburgh, Pa.

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To the Princess Sayn Wittgenstein,

BORN PRINCESS BARIATINSKY.


ACCEPT THE DEDICATION OF THESE PAGES
CONSECRATED TO THE SAINTLY MEMORY OF ONE
UNITED TO YOU BY THE
DOUBLE TIE OF A COMMON FAITH AND A
COMMON NATIONALITY.

YOU WERE THE FIRST TO ENCOURAGE ME TO WRITE THEM ;
IT WAS IN YOUR HOME THAT I ACCOMPLISHED THE
GREATEST PORTION OF A TASK WHICH WILL
EVER BE ASSOCIATED IN MY MIND WITH
MON ABRI ; AND TO YOU, GRATEFULLY
AND AFFECTIONATELY, I NOW
MAKE AN OFFERING OF
MY WORK.

P. L. F. C.

*Mon Abri, Lausanne,
September 25th, 1876.*

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INTRODUCTION.



THE life of a Saint ought, as a rule, to be written by a Saint. It is not the first time that this thought has struck me; but I never felt more convinced of its truth, or more abashed by it, than in publishing the Life of Sister Natalie Narischkin. If I had only to record simple events, or to draw a picture vividly engraved on my remembrance, perhaps the task would not have exceeded my capacity. But to speak of a soul, and to relate its history from the time of its earliest impressions in childhood to the moment when it reached those heights where we can indeed contemplate but can no longer follow it, is difficult, and all but impossible, when the painter feels so immeasurably inferior to the model before him.

A Sister of Charity, if she is to be adequately depicted, should be described by one of her own companions. If the Order of St. Vincent of Paul suffered its daughters to use their pens, as did one of St. Francis of Sales' children when she wrote the lives of the first Mothers of the Visitation, we might indeed have possessed records worthy of those who would have been thus commemorated. But this was not to be. Above the care of cherishing holy recollections, above the advantage of perpetuating great examples, above even the desire of imitating the Church in preserving the memory of departed Saints, the Order of St. Vincent prizes that spirit of deep humility

which seeks and enjoins, and, as far as possible, insists on silence, if not on the general character and blessed results of the work of the Sisters of Charity, at any rate on their individual merits.

The *circulars*, which are sometimes printed as a record of some few of those devoted lives, are simple outlines of a picture which may remind those who have known the originals, of what they have themselves witnessed, but cannot convey to others any idea of it. And even if the case was different, these circulars are only read by members of the Order, and beyond this very restricted limit the Sisters neither seek, nor, with very rare exceptions, permit, any greater publicity.

One of these exceptions was made—in our days—with regard to a Sister of Charity, whose holy and admirable life was written by a biographer * fully worthy of such a task. In this case there was something quite exceptional both in the degree of notoriety which that wonderful life had acquired, and the reputation of him who undertook to write it.

The author of the “Life of the Sœur Rosalie” had not the same reasons as I have to say,

“Me digno à cio, ne io, ne altri crede.”†

I feel on this occasion peculiarly in need of the indulgence of the public—of that special public for whom this book is written. It will not interest persons entirely absorbed in politics, or who, if they wish for a moment to rest their thoughts from anxious preoccupations, seek distraction only in fiction. It will suit those alone who like to refresh their minds with the contemplation of facts, real indeed, but of a different description from the

* The Vicomte de Melun.

† “Neither I, nor others, think me worthy of it.”—*Dante*.

events which convulse the world. They will indeed easily discern all the defects of this work; but knowing as they do how seldom it is possible to individualize, so to speak, a Sister of Charity, and to relate her special history, they will thank me, perhaps, for having attempted it, and accept the result of my work without too severely criticising it.

If any amongst them are, however, surprised that I have undertaken this difficult task, they will see, if they read this book, that the childhood and youth of Sister Natalie Narischkin was intimately connected with the dearest remembrances of my own life and a family history which has interested the public to a degree I could never have expected or foreseen. If at the time that I collected those reminiscences I had been able to give them a wider scope, the loved and venerated image of this dear friend would have been more conspicuously brought forward. As it is, she is mentioned in "A Sister's Story," and this gives me the right an artist claims, to select a figure in the background of one of his own pictures, and reproducing it on another canvas to paint it more carefully, and exhibit its peculiar beauty.

As I have alluded to the "Sister's Story," I will add, in order to throw light on the beginning of this history, that I take it for granted that my readers are acquainted with that record.

And now, in case I have not entirely failed in my attempt, I must express my gratitude to those to whom I shall ascribe that result. First, and foremost, to the venerated Superiors of Sister Natalie, whose kindness authorized a work which could not have been undertaken without their sanction; and then to her dear companions, who with unwearied patience replied to all my questions, and facilitated my task by the loan of numerous and invaluable documents. Again, most particularly

to her two sisters, the Baroness de Petz and Mdlle. Catharine Narischkin, who by entrusting me with her letters, and permitting me largely to extract from them, gave to these pages a value which nothing else would have imparted to them. And finally, to the Vicomtesse des Cars, Sister Natalie's dearest friend, whose intelligent kindness and co-operation afforded me indispensable assistance.

May those who have thus helped me vouchsafe to pray that God may bless my work, and then, however weak may be the writer's hand, it will assuredly be blest

SISTER NATALIE NARISCHKIN.

CHAPTER I.

1835—1841.



THOSE who have read "A Sister's Story," and who remember the pages which describe the short life and the holy death of Olga de la Ferronnays, have not, perhaps, forgotten that amongst the names uttered with the deepest tenderness by her dying lips were those of two young girls whose arrival she had hoped for and expected, but whom, as a last sacrifice, God ordained that she should not see again. Had one more hour of life been granted to her, the wish would have been fulfilled; but this was not to be, and when her friends arrived they did not find her alive.

The youngest and, to Olga, the dearest of those friends was Natalie Narischkin, who, on her side, had been ardently desiring a meeting which did not take place until death made it a strangely sad and solemn one. In the height of her beauty and in the full bloom of health, she knelt by the bed on which Olga was lying crowned with white roses, and with the serene and exulting expression on her face which the departed soul had left behind it. Very long did Natalie remain by that mortuary couch, motionless and absorbed in prayer. She spent there the rest of the day, and a part of the night. Olga

had intensely longed to speak to her before her death; but now a more powerful voice than her own made her friend hear, during those silent hours, what she had not been able to say to her. More than once already had that Divine voice spoken to the young girl's heart in the midst of the world, but during her prolonged watch she heard it so distinctly that the impression it made on her mind was never obliterated. To her latest day she spoke with emotion of that night of prayer, as of the time when a special and decisive grace had descended on her soul.

Thirty years afterwards, when she had been already wearing, for twenty-five years, the habit of the daughters of St. Vincent of Paul, Natalie adverted to the recollections of that night in a way which those who heard it can never forget, and with that heavenly expression of countenance which was peculiar to her. Those who knew Sister Natalie only during the latter part of her life, looked upon this expression as the natural result—the effect, as it were—of an existence so long devoted to an heroic love of God, and of the poor; but her face had, even in childhood, been always remarkable for this particular look of openness and firmness, of sweetness and of energy; for a sort of serene gravity strange at such an age, and stranger still when she was old enough to mix in society. It was with the white *cornette* of a Sister of Charity that this angel-like countenance harmonized. We might almost say that it accounted for it.

Natalie Narischkin was born at St. Petersburg, on the 6th of May, 1820. She was the daughter of M. Gregoire Narischkin and the Princess Anne Mestchersky. They had been obliged, for the sake of health, to leave their home and to spend many years in Italy with their children—one son and four daughters. Natalie was the third of these daughters. Brought up far from their

native land, they had no early recollections of Russia, where their family, nevertheless, occupied a high and important position. Peter the Great's mother was related to them; and in a country where titles are highly prized and lavishly bestowed, the Narischkins have always declined any such addition to their name, considering it sufficiently illustrious to dispense with it.

I had often seen Natalie and her sisters in their childhood, but the first distinct recollection I have of her was at Naples in the month of June, 1835. She was then fifteen, and in deep mourning for her grandfather, who had died at Sorrento a few weeks before. She came to spend a whole day with my sister Olga, who was exactly of the same age. I was struck by her appearance, and by the sweet and peculiarly serious expression of her face, in keeping indeed with her deep mourning, but still somewhat singular in so young a girl. I see her now before my eyes as she stood that day in the bright sunshine of Naples, dressed all in black, with her pale and clear complexion, her large blue eyes, her fair hair divided in thick plaits, and that peculiar charm in her glance, her smile, and her whole manner, which would have made it impossible for any one not to notice her; and noticing her, not to wonder who she was, what were her thoughts, and what was to be her future fate. At that time the friendship between her and Olga was useful to both of them; they had the same pious inclinations, the same purity of heart, the same attraction towards goodness, and they mutually encouraged each other in following it—though they had not then, and never had on earth, the happiness of being united in the same faith.

Soon after this first meeting they were separated, and did not meet again for five years; the melancholy and important events which happened during that time in Olga's family casting a sadness over her young life, but

at the same time shedding light on her soul, reacted to some degree on her friend. Alexandrine's conversion, the death of Albert, the years spent at Boury, had all tended to deepen the piety of one of these young girls, and in a measure influenced them both.

Natalie, with her sisters, was beginning to mix in society. She was much admired, and the world surrounded her with its attractions; but Olga still remained her dearest friend. She had been made acquainted with all the feelings of her heart during that long absence; she had shared the anxieties of Albert and Alexandrine's journey, and then the anguish that followed their return to Paris. Olga's letters had revealed to her every detail of that way of sorrows, which these girls of sixteen were not old enough, perhaps, fully to appreciate; but which, nevertheless, made a lasting impression on their young minds.

Neither Olga nor Natalie were meant to live in the world: God was preparing them for Himself alone. Olga was the earliest endowed with supernatural strength, doubtless because her time on earth was to be short; and the energy she derived from a premature familiarity with grief was useful, not only to her own soul, but also to Natalie's, which was one day to rise still higher than her own, and to reach those summits which none can attain unless the voice of God Himself calls them to such heights.

After a separation of five years the two friends met at Naples towards the end of the year 1839. They were then nineteen. This was, for Olga, the greatest of the pleasures she enjoyed during the only days in which she joined in worldly amusements. This moment of her life was like an hour of sunshine between two storms: the first had saddened the last days of her childhood; the second, a still darker one, was about to throw a gloom

over those of her youth, and to prepare her to arrive rapidly at the only real end of life and happiness.

It was a longer and more arduous path that was to lead Natalie to the goal they have both of them now arrived at. But for her also life was to be severed in its early bloom from a world renounced as entirely by one final sacrifice as if death had set its seal on that separation.

It is difficult, in looking back to the time we are speaking of, not to be struck by the contrast between the transient frivolity of those days of earthly dissipation and the future which was in store for both these girls; and yet, is there any destiny to which this thought does not in some measure apply? Is there any life which is not brief, or any fate which is not fraught with the deepest importance? It is only our unaccountable and universal folly which blinds us to these truths, and makes us often so ill apply the words "pleasure and sorrow," "joy and grief," "life and death."

To call those happy who forget God in the world, and to pity those who forsake it for His sake; to speak of those who are about to die as the living, and number amongst the dead those in possession of eternal life; is it not, as Bossuet says, "to speak a barbarous foreign tongue, and to forget the language of our true home"? We all, more or less, use that alien form of speech. It is well we should be aware of it; for, in order to learn the true language of our heavenly Home, it is necessary, as in every other study, that we should be conscious of our own ignorance. Such being the case, it would be with more regret than pleasure that my memory would dwell on those days, in appearance so full of brightness, if it was not that I find, at every step, a number of remembrances which link that time of youthful dissipation with the earnest sequel which was to follow.

It is always cheering to see God's merciful dealings with pure hearts and upright intentions, even when those hearts are, for a while, too much engrossed with the frivolities of life. It seems as if His Hand, like that of a loving Father, was extended over the child whom He guides and restrains.

Of the two friends, it was Natalie for whom the world was preparing its most dangerous snares; she who was, one day, so energetically to renounce it. Olga only participated for a short time in these worldly amusements, whereas Natalie was, for years, exposed to the temptations they present. Olga was also strengthened by all the graces which a fervent first communion imparts to the soul. Recent and solemn events had added their effects to the impressions which four years spent with Alexandrine had made on her mind. Natalie, on the contrary, though her childhood was not free from trials, had not as yet undergone any such sobering influences. Her father's uncertain health, and, later on, her mother's declining state, had indeed somewhat saddened her home. But in early youth this sort of depressing atmosphere, instead of producing the salutary effects often caused by sudden and startling events, generally tends to provoke a feeling of weariness rather than of seriousness, and a desire to shake off this depression by distractions.

Nor does the Greek Church afford her children that blessed starting-point which those of the Catholic Church find on the threshold of life. Natalie entered the world protected only by her perfect purity of heart and the invisible grace of God, but without any of the help which youth derives from submission to authority. And yet at this the most worldly time of her life, some one who saw her in a ball-room could not refrain from saying, "Really that girl looks as if she had just made her first Communion." This remark—which was often

reiterated by others—illustrates what I have already said of the peculiar expression of her countenance. She was dressed that day like her companions; nor did her thoughts, perhaps, differ from theirs. Nothing in her, or about her, betokened her future destiny, and yet it seemed as if that unknown future was already surrounding her with a strange halo.

Balls and parties and worldly amusements were not, however, even at that time, her only, or greatest, enjoyment. The happiest of her evenings were those when her sisters and herself were allowed to invite to their mother's house some of their most intimate friends. Olga and her young sister were always of that number, and used to obtain leave from their parents to join these girlish parties, on condition that they returned at once when sent for.

One day Olga transgressed this rule, and displeased her parents by a delay which had made them anxious. She wrote in her Journal, "I have had to-day a sorrow and a great joy: sorrow, because my father was annoyed at my having remained so late last night at the Narischkins, which made mamma say that it frightened her to see how I am always carried away by the pleasure of the moment;" as for her joy, it arose from a circumstance that would not, perhaps, have given such intense delight to many girls.

A letter written by Father Lacordaire had made a great impression on a set of young men, amongst whom was one of Olga's brothers and another friend of the Narischkins. "At first," she goes on to relate in her Journal, "they began by joking, but by degrees every one became serious, and we heard from F—— that they had all made good resolutions. This morning Natalie wrote to me that R—— had told her that he had said his prayers yesterday for the first time since October. Oh

what a happiness this is! I feel I should be so much happier and better if everybody was good."

The friend here alluded to seemed likely at that time to play an important part in Natalie's life. He admired and liked her, and their friends—not unnaturally—supposed that they were likely to be married. This was often the case with her. The feelings inspired by her remarkable attractions, and her own tenderness of heart, seemed likely to lead to some mutual attachment and early marriage. Several plans of this sort were thought of, but some circumstance or other always intervened to prevent their accomplishment, until the day came when a supreme and Divine obstacle arose—that one obstacle which no earthly changes can affect or overcome.

It is interesting to observe how high the key-note, so to speak, of the hearts of these young girls was tuned, even in the midst of a gay life. The salvation of a soul was even then, in their eyes, the most important of all objects; to such a degree that the joy of hearing that one estranged from God had felt faith and fervor reawakening in his heart, had been enough to stamp that day of their lives with a holy and peculiar joy.

When a human soul has found its way to God, either by an early death or a complete consecration of itself to Him, we like to notice many trifling facts, till then unheeded, which show the Eye and Hand of Providence watching over and guiding those He has chosen for His own, even whilst their lives are still imperfect, and the world surrounding them with circumstances apparently most foreign to their vocation.

Natalie, born in the Greek Church, but transplanted, so to speak, into a land far distant from her native country, had no opportunity of observing its peculiarly local and national form of worship; and severed also from the practice of the religion prevalent in the one

where her childhood and youth were spent, she might easily have grown up in a state of indifference, or at any rate of carelessness, which even in the midst of religious influences is too often the case in youth. But not so with Natalie. From her earliest years she turned instinctively towards everything that tended to raise the mind upward. It seemed as if a Divine voice was ever sounding in her ears and commanding her attention, and that God never allowed her to remain deaf to it.

Her parents had indeed given her pious examples and instructions; but what I allude to are the germs of heroism in virtue existing in her soul, which by means of apparently accidental—but, as they turned out, providential—circumstances developed and expanded, till at last they arrived at full maturity. For instance, after Olga had left Naples in 1835, Natalie returned to Sorrento, and after parting with her first and dearest friend, made acquaintance with a family—that of the Baron de Massa—who inhabited a villa close to the one where she was staying. She found in her new playmates not only the simple childish piety which she had admired in Olga, but the zeal of young apostles unrestrained by any of the prudential considerations which influence older people; and, full of the ardor of Italian faith, they did not hesitate to adjure her to become a Catholic, and to add to their entreaties all the arguments furnished by their early knowledge of the great truths of religion.

The parents on both sides put a stop to these religious discussions; but if heroism is contagious and can be unconsciously imbibed, we may venture to suppose that it was through her intimacy with these Catholic children that Natalie caught its first symptoms—for, later on, five of these boys became Jesuits, devoted themselves to the foreign missions, and were sent to China. One of them—Father Gaëtano Massa—had the happiness, in return-

ing to Europe, to find the companion of his childhood clad in the habit of the Daughters of St. Vincent of Paul. He went back afterwards to China, and died a martyr at the time of the attack on the College of Zi-ha-va.

We may add that in her widowhood the mother of this heroic missionary entered the Convent of the Visitation in Naples, and that her youngest daughter, whose affianced husband had died on the eve of their nuptials, consecrated her life to God in the same Religious House.

Such friends as these had no doubt contributed to fan the latent fire in Natalie's heart. And when she was no longer a child, and mixed with the world, other useful and valued friendships were not wanting to her. Besides Olga and Albertine de la Ferronnays, another girl, younger than herself, had a considerable and lasting influence over Natalie. Alexandrine Lebzeltern's cultivated mind, her deep piety, and perfect simplicity of character, made her fully worthy of such a friendship; and their intimacy was all the greater on account of the connection of the Austrian Minister's daughter with Russia. Her mother belonged to a Russian family. Neither of these young persons had ever been in France, and yet they were both intended by Providence to become in some sense French, and both of them to bear in that country honored names,—Alexandrine Lebzeltern by marrying into one of the noblest families in France,* and Natalie by the adoption of a title of a higher sort—that of a daughter of St. Vincent of Paul—one of the most glorious a woman can bear, though pride is forever forbidden to those who assume it.

In after-life, living as they did in the same land, united in the same faith and in the strictest bonds of friendship, they saw as much of each other as their different posi-

* Mademoiselle de Lebzeltern married the Vicomte des Cars.

tions permitted. Death alone severed that devoted friendship. It is to this friend's assistance that I look in the performance of a work which she would have accomplished more easily and more perfectly than myself.

The two young girls were living at that time in the midst of many older persons who belonged to the same set, and were subsequently more or less associated with Natalie's existence. Three sisters, the Mesdles. Fontin, French in name but Russians by birth, reckoned amongst the most intimate friends of both their families. The premature death of one of them, in 1837, decided the complete retirement from the world of the two others. They lived together and devoted themselves from that time to God, to the poor, and to their friends. Like true Sisters of Charity in the world, they spent at Naples thirty-five years, as other people spend one day, in a continual succession of good works. One of them died two years ago, leaving behind her an honored and beloved memory; the last of these attached sisters still pursues her way on earth—that road brightened by faith, an ever-increasing charity, and a calm and secure hope. She is not a stranger to the story of Natalie's life, for she loved her when a child. She followed, with the deepest sympathy, the course of her holy life; and now she follows, with her prayer, the sainted soul of her young friend into that Eternity where she has preceded her.

There was again another set of sisters which a variety of circumstances both then and later on brought into intimate relations with Natalie. These were the Miss Frasers. Their family was originally Scotch, and had settled in Austria at the time when English Catholics were often obliged to seek abroad the free exercise of their religion. A long-standing intimacy had existed between them and the Lebzelterns, and one of the sisters of the Count adopted, as it were, the daughters of the

English exiles. One of them, named Miana, became one of Natalie's dearest friends. The eldest sister was married to Count Henri de Bombelles;* the youngest, Margaret,—or, as she was habitually called, Mita—married a high-born and accomplished Sicilian, the Marquis Gargallo.

It would take up too much time to enumerate all those whose friendship and whose example surrounded Natalie's childhood and youth with associations which influenced her whole future life. We shall have occasion to allude to them later on in this history.

But we cannot omit mentioning a circumstance which she always said herself had made a deep impression upon her. This was the return to Naples of Alexandrine, Comtesse Albert de la Ferronnays, who had then been for four years a widow. Natalie had seen her five years before, embarking for the East, in the full tide of a happiness which, if sometimes clouded by anxiety, was not yet darkened by it. Now she met her again, clad in those weeds which she never was to doff, and completely

* May it be allowed to the translator of this biography to mention here that it was the Comtesse Henri de Bombelles who lent her the first book which awoke in her mind earnest religious impressions, and laid in her soul the seeds of conversion to the Catholic Faith. One evening, in the year 1835, in a villa near Turin, the residence of the Austrian Minister, Madame de Bombelles observed that the young Protestant Englishwoman, then her guest, was looking into the pages of St. Francis de Sales' "Introduction to a Devout Life," and she quietly said, "Would you like to take that book home with you?" The offer was eagerly accepted, and the night spent in reading the volume which all but converted King James I. It did its work in the soul to which it was thus casually presented. Many years elapsed before impressions grew into convictions, and subsequently became faith; but to the loan of that book, and to what she saw and heard in that pious home and its little chapel, the writer of these lines attributes the first dawnings of the grace which led her, eleven years afterwards, into the Catholic Church.

severed from the world. She witnessed the perfect serenity which resulted from her possession of the true faith, purchased at the cost of her whole earthly happiness, and, as she deemed, not too dearly bought at that price. To look at her was, in itself, a lesson which, if not fully understood by Natalie, still made a deep impression upon her. And at that time the Abbé Gerbet was also at Naples and spent there that winter of 1840 under the roof of Olga's parents.

Natalie was often present at conversations which left an indelible impression on the minds of all those who took part in them. The spirit of holiness and the charm of genius influenced their tone. Subjects were viewed in a new light. Even merriment was mingled with something useful and improving. It seemed as if souls expanded and hearts were lightened by the purer atmosphere, higher than earth and nearer to heaven, where they were unconsciously raised. Natalie carried with her, even into the cloister, the remembrance of those hours of virtuous social intercourse; and even now they deter from the vain and insipid converse of the world, those who have for long years preserved their precious memory.

Kneeling between Alexandrine and Olga in the churches where her mother never objected to her accompanying them, Natalie used to see them, with envy, go up to the Altar to receive Holy Communion. This seemed alone to awaken her to the sense of the separation between herself and the friends whose faith she felt so completely to share. The barrier between the Greeks and the Catholics seemed almost imperceptible in the eyes of a young girl, till a real, tangible privation brought it before her, and renewed that winter—and this time with unconquerable force—the thoughts and desires she had felt years before at Sorrento.

The following letter, written in answer to the an-

nouncement of the sudden and premature death of a young man belonging to the Neapolitan Society, gives an idea of the tendency of her mind at that time:

“Your letter, which I received this morning, gave me both grief and pleasure. I did not know any more than you did all his virtues; but as he made no display of them, and yet was full of faith, piety, and charity, he could die in peace and happiness. He has received his reward. . . Oh yes, he is now happy! and each time that the thought of his death brings tears into my eyes, I look up to heaven, and I feel as if I saw him there. I think of his actual bliss and of the infinite mercy of our Saviour who redeemed him with His Blood. We have in him a friend who prays for us, I am sure. Good-by. I do not feel able to write more at present. Do not give way to sorrow. After all, it has been God’s will; we must submit ours to His, and not only submit, but adore that Divine Will, for God is so good, and loves us so much more than we can love ourselves, that He never allows anything to happen that is not for our good. . . . It may so happen that this death, which grieves us so much, will be a source of blessing to others. It is possible that it is the means God employs to touch the heart of some poor sinner, to convert and lead him back to the heavenly road, and would not that be the greatest of all happinesses? He is in heaven. Some friend of his, struck by the thought of his premature death, is now perhaps praying more fervently for the salvation of his own soul; and will, in consequence, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the only thing we must all covet.

“NATALIE.”

These words seem strange ones for a young girl apparently plunged in worldly pleasures. The tone of this letter betrays a spirit which every successive step of her life was more conspicuously to evince.

CHAPTER II.

1841.



IN the spring of the year 1841 Olga left Naples with her mother, to go to Goritz, the residence of the exiled royal family of France. The two friends parted with the full expectation of soon meeting again. Madame Narischkin meant to go to Paris in the course of the year; Olga and her family were also to return there, and with this in view it was with smiles that they took leave of each other; and without the slightest presentiment of the sad and solemn circumstances which were to attend their next meeting. A few days before her departure, Olga wrote in her Journal:

“Easter Sunday, April 19th, 1841.

“I have spent a very happy day! This morning we all received Communion together. Then we came home to breakfast, and went afterwards to Mass in the King’s Chapel. Natalie came with us. During Mass I felt a happiness I had not known for a long time. The festival of to-day filled me with excessive joy. If I could have written at that moment, I think I should have been inspired. At first I was excited, but afterwards quite calm. ‘God is very good, that is all I can say!’”

The friend kneeling by her side was doubtless prayed for in those hours of fervent devotion on this happy Easter-day. But what were Natalie’s own thoughts then? Was the light shining even then behind the mist which so often veils the dawn of a bright day?—that

light of truth and love which was one day to illuminate her mind; to burn and consume her soul. Perhaps it did shine then like a feeble and vacillating gleam; but what we are certain of is, that, feeble as it may have been, she followed it with a wonderful fidelity; and never from the moment that it dawned upon her, up to the time when it kindled in her soul a Divine fire, did she for a single day close her eyes to it. She paused indeed—she hesitated sometimes—she never turned back. Long before she could clearly define what she was seeking, it was God alone she was striving for.

Everything in her soul was in confusion, and little was apparent on the surface. Those who loved her best did not always understand her. Perhaps she scarcely understood herself in those days; but a firm, simple, faithful, pure intention, fed—like oil feeds a lamp—that hidden flame, and preserved it from ever going out.

Towards the end of the year 1840, Madame Narischkin left Naples, with her daughters, to go to Paris. They stopped on their way at Nice, and remained there some time. There, as elsewhere, Providence brought Natalie into contact with friends singularly well adapted to favor and advance her growing convictions.

Amongst their greatest friends at Naples none had been more intimate with the Narischkin family than the Count and Countess Xavier de Maistre. Madame de Maistre was a Russian, and related to them. Her house was the one which the three sisters most habitually frequented, and as their mother was often unable on account of her health to take them out herself, it was under the Countess's chaperonage that they generally went into society.

The salon of the Count and Countess de Maistre was one of the pleasantest at Naples. Their home life was singularly bright and agreeable. His kindliness, and the

playful simplicity of his manner, as well as his cleverness and talent, lent it a peculiar charm. Although Count Xavier de Maistre's reputation was inferior to that of his illustrious brother, he was celebrated as an author. His modesty and his indifference to his own literary fame were such, that several years after the publication of the "*Voyage autour de ma Chambre*" and the "*Lépreux de la Cité d'Aoste*," he was quite surprised on arriving in Paris to find those works famous and in everybody's hands.

He never really cared about literary renown, and perhaps hardly gave to letters the time and thought which his abilities called for. His freedom from vanity was such, that success in that line afforded him no pleasure; and though his merit as a painter—fair as it was—did not approach to his talent for writing, he decidedly preferred using his brush to his pen. The hours he spent in painting were the happiest in his life; for this occupation was in complete harmony with his passionate love of the beauties of nature, and the intense delight it gave him, after long years spent in the north of Europe, to dwell under the bright Italian sky and in the midst of the enchanting scenery of Naples. It was impossible to be more agreeable, more lovable, more kind to others than Count Xavier de Maistre; but there was in him none of the deep, penetrating, all but prophetic inspiration, the genius, and the eloquence of the great Joseph de Maistre. Although he was a religious man and a pious Catholic, he possessed none of the rough energy of his brother's faith, none of the ardor of his zeal, or of that vehement and powerful controversial spirit, which if it often awakened opposition, never left room for indifference. Nothing of the sort existed in Count Xavier de Maistre's amiable and peaceable nature. His wife, also a good and amiable woman, was a member of the

Greek Church, and somewhat imbued with prejudices against Catholicism. Conversation on religious subjects would have easily led to discussion, and he maintained a silence as to such topics conducive to domestic peace, which he perhaps esteemed more highly than the interests of truth.

It was not, therefore, in their house that Natalie was subjected to influences bearing on the religious direction of her future life; but it was owing to these friends that she made acquaintance with the family of Count Rodolph de Maistre, Governor of Nice, and son of Count Joseph de Maistre, whose society and example made a lasting impression upon her, and matured the serious thoughts which even in the midst of the gayeties of Naples had forced themselves on her mind. The ardent and earnest natures, the stores of information, the intense faith and zeal—all hereditary gifts—with which her new acquaintances were endowed, enabled them to enter into controversy in a way from which Olga would have shrunk, though she had inspired her friend with the desire of fathoming them. A great intimacy was rapidly formed between Natalie and the daughters of the Count de Maistre. One of them, the Marchesa Fassati, confirms—in a letter recently written—what I have already said as to the peculiarity of the young Russian girl's manner and countenance at that time of her life.

"I was struck," she says, "with the modest look of recollection which was so remarkable in her, even in a ball-room. Often in the midst of the parties at my father's house, she and my sister used to steal out of the crowded rooms and withdraw for a few minutes of prayer in the chapel. . . . Her image has always remained impressed in my mind as a type of purity, simplicity, and humility."

Does not this description tally exactly with the im-

pression she made on those who saw her in the ball-rooms of Naples? She always seemed to be listening to an interior voice that made her as indifferent to the praises as, later on, she was to the criticisms of the world. There was something about her which reminded one of Dante's Beatrice,* whom the poet shows us clothed with humility, and pursuing her way careless of the praises addressed to her, and looking as if she belonged rather to heaven than to earth.

By the time Madame Narischkin and her daughter arrived in Paris, Natalie knew that Olga would not be there. Since they had parted at Naples, many sad events and apprehensions of impending sorrows had changed all the plans of her family. After spending the winter and the summer of 1841 in the North of Italy, the La Ferronnays all returned to Rome at the beginning of 1842, and Eugénie, Comtesse de Mun,† accompanied them in this journey.

About the same time Natalie and her sisters arrived in Paris, where Providence seemed to have purposely provided them with friends whom they had known at Naples and in Italy, who were to carry on the work which, at Naples, the La Ferronnays had begun, and at Nice the De Maistres had continued. The invisible hand that was guiding Natalie did not leave her exposed without defence to the brilliant and dazzling impressions which Paris is wont to make on strangers who only witness its exterior aspect. At the house of the Duke of Serra-Capriola, at that time Neapolitan Ambassador in France, the young Russians were welcomed—warmly welcomed

* *Ella, s'en va sentendosi lodare
Benignamente d'umiltà vestuta,
E pur che sia una cosa venuta,
Dal cielo in terra, a miracol mostrare.*

† Mother of Count Albert de Mun.

—by the Duchess, his wife, and almost like sisters by his daughters. Without any preconcerted plan—almost unconsciously—the young people of both families grew into the habit of spending the mornings together, and meeting at the same place every evening.

Strongly as Madame Narischkin opposed later on her daughter's change of religion, it must be admitted that at that time she objected to none of the proceedings which must, nevertheless, have tended to increase her desire for it. At Paris, even more than at Naples, she allowed her and her sisters to accompany their friends to churches and to convents as often as they liked. They were, according to their different ages and characters, more or less influenced by what they saw. On Natalie and Catherine the impressions thus produced were deeper still than they had been in Italy or at Nice.

A religious movement was then going on in Paris, not unlike the one we are actually witnessing. It prepared, in fact, the results we now behold. It has not, however, pleased God to grant to the present epoch the wonderful preachers who roused the Catholic spirit of France in the days I speak of. Since the eloquent voices of Lacordaire and Ravignan have been hushed in death, none of equal strength and power have been heard amongst us. There were laymen also at that time, men of genius and of faith—noble and generous hearts, unsurpassed by any of their successors in the path they opened—who mercilessly attacked, in their stronghold, infidelity, indifference, and cynical unbelief. A spirit of fervor and zeal seemed to pervade the very air, and whilst the historical reminiscences of the Church were exciting a new interest, and eloquent pens revived those half-forgotten memories, the monuments of its former greatness were raised from their ruins, and becoming objects of reverence to the French people. Magnificent works of charity were re-

vived or originated; and all we now see flourishing and increasing in every direction was then starting into life with an energy, a strength, a holy impetuosity which cannot be forgotten by those who shared the emotions of that revival. Then, as ever, Paris was that strange place which contains two such opposite elements in its bosom, two such different cities, that strangers not acquainted with both can, according to the sphere in which their lot is cast, with equal truth declare: one, that in the whole world there does not exist a more dissipated, perverse, insane, and boldly wicked town; and another, that nowhere can there be found one more devout, more exemplary, more exceptionally pious, or more actively charitable.

It was this last Paris that Natalie and Catherine Narischkin, under the guidance of the mother of their Neapolitan friends, learned to know and appreciate. This knowledge proved a most essential antidote to the pleasures of society, which they still frequented. But already Natalie was not the same person as at Naples. We have seen her at Nice, leaving the ball-room to pray in the silent chapel. She was beginning, more and more, to experience that yearning for seclusion which is one of the first manifestations of God's designs on a soul to whom He says He will call her into solitude, and there speak to her heart. Her only delight was to be in churches, and still more in the convents which she was wont to visit with the Duchess de Serra-Capriola and her daughters.

One day they took her to the central Mother House of the Sisters of Charity in the Rue de Bac, that house where she was to spend so many years of her existence; where she was to learn the meaning, and find the satisfaction, of all those deep longings which already filled her soul. This was an important epoch in her life.

Often and often she returned to it. No other church in Paris attracted her as much as the chapel of that immense Religious House; the chapel where, a short time before, that wonderful vision had been vouchsafed of which we all wear the commemorative medal, and which suggested the prayer which, since then, has been familiar to the lips of every Catholic, and daily repeated throughout the world: "Hail, Mary, conceived without sin."

The humble Sister chosen to be the recipient and the messenger of that Divine communication was still alive at the time we are writing of; but no one knew, or will ever know, her name. Nothing distinguished her from the multitude of her companions, and whilst the pious devotion which was to be the safeguard and salvation of so many souls was fast spreading in the Church of all lands, she remained concealed like one of those sweet flowers hidden from sight by a thick foliage, but filling the air with its delicious perfume.

Natalie listened with the deepest interest to these details, and it seemed to her that for the first time she understood what is meant by humility, in the full sense attached to that word by the teaching of the Church, and the practice of the Saints. She perceived that it was quite distinct from the purely human virtue of modesty, not seldom assumed as a mask, and under favor of which praises are rejected with the sole object of obtaining credit for additional virtue. Those who are really humble are unconscious of it; and others should abstain even from alluding to the beauty of what they see in a soul of this sort, lest the breath of their praise should sully that delicate quality and make it vanish. Of all the virtues which constitute Christian perfection, it is, generally speaking, the one most seldom appreciated and understood outside the Catholic Church.

Heresy and schism have a natural tendency to nurture pride ; the highest token of sincerity, the most certain sign of grace, is to love humility, or even to comprehend its real meaning.

Natalie, who was to prove so wonderful an example of this virtue, had the holy seed of it in her soul. Instead of being repulsed, or astonished, or disgusted with what she saw in this Religious Community—as is often the case with those outside the Church, and sometimes even with Catholics, who if they observe the precepts do not follow the counsels of their religion—she was instantly struck with admiration, and deeply and silently meditated on its import. She sought to obtain information from the Sisters, especially from the venerable Sister Barba, who was her first friend in that house. She liked to talk to Father Aladel, a pious Lazarist missionary. He it was who told her the history of the vision which had been seen in the chapel of the convent. Natalie kept these things in her heart, and pondered over them during the long hours she spent on her knees in the sanctuary where that Holy Mother had appeared whom she had loved from her childhood, and loved more and more as the desire to draw near her, and grow like her, increased in her soul.

This apparition of the Blessed Virgin was the first of those which have taken place in France, in this century. Twice again since, still more humble Apostles have revealed to us similar manifestations, the reality of which seems evinced by the wonderful fruits of grace they produce. Faith and fervor have been, and daily continue to be, rekindled in the hearts of those who seek the spots sanctified by those sacred visions ; and multitudes from every part of the world visit the obscure and remote localities which have now become famous sanctuaries.

We own that it is a complete mystery to us that per-

sons who firmly believe in the Christian religion, should scout and deride our pious and reasonable admittance of the possibility and the reality of such occurrences. Can they venture to assert that it is *impossible* that our Blessed Lord, His Mother, and His Saints should ever revisit this world of ours? Can they point to a single text in the Scriptures which predicts the day and the hour when miracles were to cease? If they cannot do so, they must content themselves with disputing the proofs of the particular facts in question, a liberty which we entirely concede to them. But strong must be the counter-evidence, if it is to convict of insanity, or of falsehood, all the holy persons who testify to the truth of these miraculous occurrences, and to condemn the pilgrimages which result from that belief. And, what are they—these pilgrimages—but a union of public prayers and an increase of fervor in supplicating for help, at a time when we have such great need of grace, and such an amount of public and private mercies to sue for? Does not God tell us to ask if we are to receive? And, as never before have so many miseries called so loudly for Divine aid, is it incredible that Mary, the Mother of Jesus our Brother, should come sometimes amongst us to revive our faith and renew in us the spirit of ardent prayer? Can it be truly alleged that such a supposition is inconsistent with what faith teaches, hope believes, and love has reason to expect. Are we to reject it only because the piety it awakens sometimes assumes a form unpalatable to our taste? Oh, sometimes we sorrowfully feel that there are souls enlightened, perhaps, but not warmed, by the beams of God's boundless mercies; and then we long for that promised outpouring of Divine grace which some think is at hand—of the spirit of love, as well as of light, which is “to renew the face of the earth.”

Whilst Natalie was spending, in the way we have described, the last days of the year 1841 and the beginning of 1842, and whilst her life was undergoing a silent transformation, the friend of her youth was struck by successive and terrible sorrows. In the month of January, Olga—dressed for a ball, and her head adorned with flowers which she had not time to remove—was summoned to behold her father pass suddenly from life to death; and before the grief and the terrible emotions of this event had softened and subsided, Eugénie, her favorite sister and the idol of her young heart, was torn from her with equal rapidity though not so unexpectedly.

Olga's health gave way under this double grief. She fell dangerously ill, and it seemed probable that she would follow Eugénie to the grave. For a while, however, she recovered, but never was the same as before these catastrophes. She had received her death-blow, and her soul had undergone a saintly change. As Natalie's history has again been brought into connection with that of her friend, we may quote here a passage from one of Olga's already published letters; for there can be no doubt that the feelings she was then experiencing reacted on Natalie, who was unconsciously preparing also to abandon, in another way, all worldly joys and possessions.

On the 10th of May, 1842, Olga wrote from Rome: "I am quite surprised at the serenity we all feel; I who last year could not think of the *possibility* of *her* death without shuddering and bursting into tears. I am so calm and peaceful that it almost frightens me. I wondered if it could possibly come from a want of feeling. But I have had—God has sent me—such good and consoling thoughts! I find that earthly happiness—so much desired—so much regretted—is so little worth the trouble it gives. I have been deeply struck with the shortness

of life, in which joys are so brief and mingled with sorrows that one can hardly distinguish them. But grief also passes away, and is often mixed with heavenly joys;—yes, everything passes away! This was always in my mind. During those terrible days I said to myself, ‘This will likewise cease, and when we shall have been for centuries in heaven, what shall we feel about these short moments of trial? We shall, indeed, thank God for them, for they will have been the means of teaching us the little value of this life, and of making us win that eternal and glorious existence we shall then be enjoying. God has granted me the grace—young as I am—of understanding all this! Oh, I feel it to be an immense grace if I could only correspond with it! . . . The only thing to think of is to love God, to do as much good as we can, to save our souls, and to try to save those of others. There is enough in this to fill our hearts and lives, and even to fill them with happiness.’”

In Natalie’s soul—moulded as it was at that time by the strong workings of grace—such thoughts as these met with a quick response, and the desire of the two friends to meet again grew stronger than ever. It was evident that since their long separation they had advanced in a way which brought them still nearer to each other in heart and feeling, and that to be together would be a still greater joy than it had yet been. But this happiness was not in store for them. The readers of “The Sister’s Story” may remember that on her return to Brussels, after leaving Rome in the month of October, 1842, Olga was seized with another attack of the illness which was to carry her to the grave. I will not dwell here on details given elsewhere as to the state of her soul during those months of suffering, or speak of her courageous preparation for death, and angelic feelings about it. Natalie and Catherine, who were watching from a dis-

tance, with anxious grief, the course of that hopeless illness, had several times implored their mother to take them to Brussels, where Olga was expecting them with equal eagerness. One day, fully appreciating how precarious was her state, she weighed with a strange indifference the probabilities of life and death which it presented, leaving it to God to incline the scales according to His will, and declaring that whatever happened her position was a happy one. On one side of the balance—that of death—she reckoned the thought of heaven; and on the other—that of life—the joy of seeing again her dear Natalie.

At that moment, Olga still believed in the possibility of her recovery; but by the beginning of 1843 all hope of it had vanished, and she often inquired what were Madame Narischkin's plans. "Has she not promised to come?" she said, "and to bring me Catherine and Natalie?"

Her own brave and admirable mother did not know what to reply, for she had not ventured to urge Madame Narischkin, whose health was very delicate, to undertake so trying a journey in the winter. It seemed hard to invite her to witness the death of a young girl of the age of her own daughters, who might also be too deeply affected by the sad scene. As the month of February advanced, Natalie wrote every day, and still received the same afflicting answers. At last her mother, seeing her children's grief, courageously made up her mind to afford them the consolation of a final parting, and Olga welcomed that hope.

But Madame Narischkin's strength failed before setting out, and the journey was put off for a few days. Meantime, those of Olga's life were numbered. Her friends felt it, and great was their anguish. But it so happened that a Russian lady, Madame Obreskoff, who

was staying at Paris with no other object than the enjoyment of its gayeties and pleasures, most kindly proposed to Madame Narischkin to take her daughters to Brussels—an offer which was gratefully accepted; and on the evening of the 9th of February, Catherine and Natalie left Paris with that obliging friend.

On the following day, the 10th of February, 1843, I wrote in my Journal: “My blessed sister departed from this world at one o’clock. How shall I describe what I felt when, an hour afterwards, I received a note from Natalie Narischkin, announcing their arrival, and that they were coming to see Olga! Oh! that was indeed a terrible moment! But the God of peace soon quieted our souls, and the friends of our beloved one felt, as we did, the consolation of praying by her remains. They cannot leave her. It is thus that they have met again after their separation at Naples. God orders all things as He pleases, and doubtless for the good of all.”

Some years afterwards, whilst collecting these reminiscences, I added: “Those friends whom Olga had so ardently wished to see again before her death, and whose conversion to the Catholic faith she had yet more ardently desired, still belonged to the Greek Church at the time I wrote the preceding lines. They passed the whole of that day by the side of that beloved one, and also the ensuing night. They shared the long silent watch of her mother, who for twenty-four hours remained motionless, holding her child’s hand in her own, and keeping off by that pressure the cold chill of death.

Who shall say what nameless communications took place during those hours between those pure and fervent souls praying on earth, and the disembodied spirit of their departed friend? We cannot fathom such mysteries; but, so far as we do know, the future realized, be-

yond all her expectations, the hopes that Olga had carried with her to heaven. Both the companions of her youth became Catholics, and Natalie, the youngest and the dearest, was called to the highest of all vocations!

CHAPTER III.

1843.

WHAT has been said in the preceding chapter, accounts for the deep and lasting impression which the solemn scenes we have described made on Natalie, and no one will wonder that it remained stamped on her mind in a way which no subsequent events or changes could ever obliterate. There was something in the circumstances, which were surrounding and influencing her at that time, well adapted to strengthen her convictions, and to give them a reality and a depth they had not till then acquired.

For her friends at Brussels, that period was one of unprecedented emotions. Three successive bereavements in the course of one year, mingled with the most extraordinary graces and blessings, and fraught with holy examples and consolations, had produced in their souls a state of feeling quite incomprehensible to those who have never experienced the union of deep grief and supernatural joy. Sweet and awful are such moments. Everything in and around us seems transformed. Like flashes of lightning during a storm, they rend the clouds and open vistas of light which illuminate the surrounding darkness. If the soul could remain permanently possessed of that Divine light, we might almost say that sorrow could no longer exist; for the resistance of the will is the chief source of suffering, and resistance ceases when we realize the ends of life, and fully accept the means to those ends.

But life resumes its wonted course—life with its inevitable activity, and its unceasing distractions. Time pro-

duces its natural results, and there are but few human hearts uninfluenced by its action. Supernatural grace subsides, and seems to abandon us to our unsupported strength, with less courage oftentimes, and less power to endure griefs which the world thinks we have forgotten, than in the terrible hours when God's hand was at the same time crushing and supporting us.

It was just in such a moment of singular grace that Natalie—with a heart and mind prepared for deep impressions—shared with her friends the anguish of bereavement and the extraordinary religious consolations which accompanied it.

It was now three years since she had met Alexandrine at Naples, and during that time Albert de la Ferronnay's young widow had made rapid strides in that path in which a soul—if it does not recede—must advance. In 1840, at Naples, her thoughts were still divided between the present and the past. She accepted without a murmur the exchange of her earthly happiness for the blessing of truth understood and embraced, but her mind still lingered over the memories of those vanished joys. With minute care she treasured up every fond reminiscence, and made of this work of love the dearest occupation of her life. But she had now entered on the last phase of her existence, during which she seemed almost to have a foretaste of its approaching consummation, and the perfect happiness at hand. She had ceased to look back, and hastened on to the end with uplifted eyes and a heart at rest. The time of melancholy musings and of poignant regrets was past and gone. That dejection which three years before had been so visible and constant, had disappeared. Natalie had been deeply affected by the sight of a grief, gently, sweetly, submissively accepted; but the energy, the courage, the brightness, which had replaced it—even though as far as this world went gloom

was besetting Alexandrine on every side—struck her as a far higher lesson, and a stronger encouragement to her own yearnings for a still more heroic life.

Science investigates with intense eagerness all the mysteries of nature. It watches with exemplary care and infinite interest the growth of the seeds embosomed in the earth. It searches into the innumerable secrets of the transformation of matter. But is it not strange that so many men devoted to the study of the exterior world, its mysteries and its beauties, can be so utterly indifferent to that other world, full of still deeper mysteries and admirable combinations, the fruits of which are apparent and marvellous to those who examine into it? Even the most sceptical philosophers, unless their souls are utterly perverted, recognize and admire those fruits. They appreciate boundless self-devotion, spotless purity, and unlimited charity.

Better than others they know that such virtues are rare productions; that selfishness, sensuality, and pride, are the natural growth of the plant called humanity, and that their total absence is a phenomenon. But if that phenomenon exists, if it occurs and re-occurs, and if they are the same laws that produce it, is there nothing interesting in the study of those laws? Do they not themselves belong to that humanity so deeply concerned in the question? Is it not strange that more devote time and strength to the exclusive study of what goes on in the exterior world, and remain in such complete ignorance of that interior world so closely connected with their own being, and in which, by examining into the mysteries of other souls, they might make marvellous discoveries as to their own? A great writer has said, "That we must lend a more attentive ear to the accents which proceed from saintly souls than to those of the highest genius." Ought not the world of grace to be ap-

proached and investigated with more interest, eagerness, and respect than even the world of nature?

Natalie did not at that time foresee the complete transformation, the germs of which were even then lying in her heart. Her eventual vocation was still concealed in the dim future, but she had made up her mind to hasten the hour of her abjuration—if indeed she had anything to abjure;—for the religion she was about to embrace was the only one she was acquainted with, and all the pious memories of her childhood and youth were connected with it. Her resolution rejoiced, and did not surprise, her friends. Her eldest sister was of the same mind with her, and had no other wish than to assist in its accomplishment. None of them foresaw the obstacles which arose when the first decisive step had to be taken.

It must be borne in mind that the whole childhood of these young girls had been spent at Naples, where they had lived in the midst of religious practices which the tenets of the Greek Church—if even they had been under its influence—in nowise opposed. They had been taught from their earliest days to adore our Lord Jesus Christ, to venerate the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, to believe in the power of absolution, and the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. All these great fundamental Christian truths had been impressed upon them since their birth. Brought up at a distance from their native land, they felt themselves at home in the midst of that great universal Church which possesses the whole treasure of Catholic faith, and communicates it to all who belong to her, without distinction of place, language, nation, or race. A pious Russian, educated in a Catholic country, and then returning to his own land, could scarcely find a home for his soul in the Greek so-called orthodoxy. The atmosphere of a local and national

Church must be stifling to those who have felt for a while the throbbings of that universal life which knows no frontiers, which overflows the limits of seas, rivers, and mountains—and, as the Mother and Mistress of all Churches, bears the name of no particular nation. Alone, she ventures to declare that she is the *sole* possessor of the *whole* of revealed Truth. It seems difficult at first sight to understand how any Church claiming to teach can fail to make the same assertion; yet, whether it be said with exultation by her children, or in condemnation and hatred by her foes, the Catholic Church is the only one that takes up that position, and on that account she has preserved throughout successive centuries the name which expresses the idea she realizes. Like the good part Mary Magdalene chose, “it shall not be taken from her.”

Often and often have her children abandoned her, but they have never succeeded in robbing her of her glorious name, recognized in spite of them, always and everywhere. As to other Churches and sects, if it is not from a nation or a man they borrow their name, they are forced to adopt some expression or some epithet,—as in the case of the most recent secessions from Catholic truth,—which indicates its novelty even whilst claiming antiquity, by betraying the necessity of an addition to specify its meaning; for in our time, as in that of St. Augustine, the overpowering good sense of mankind, and the laws of human language, require that “*words should express what they mean.*” No! that great name “Catholic” will never be given by friends or foes but to those who are really Catholics, and to the children of the Church to whom it belongs of right.*

* We are perfectly well aware that the Russian and even the Anglican Church, in some of their official documents, call themselves

For a long time Natalie gave no thought to controversy. It seemed to her as if all her pious habits, all the affections of her childhood, and, above all, the true Sacraments which the Greek Church has the inestimable advantage of preserving, made her feel as if she belonged to the Catholic Church. So strong is this bond of sympathy, that even when it is imaginary, as in the case of the Anglicans, who delude themselves with the idea that a chain with missing links is not a broken one, it has served to warm and to draw together hearts estranged by separation. Belief in the words of Christ, and in the Real Presence; love and adoration for the Lord, thus present on our Altars; attraction towards those who carry to the highest degree this faith and this love; has been the means of bringing into the Catholic Church a number of souls outside the fold, but belonging to it by the merit of perfect good faith, and an ardent love of truth.

Far more must a member of the Greek Church have felt herself closely united with those whose faith is, in so many respects, identical with hers, whose practices she sanctions, and even whose counsels she ventures to adopt, by sometimes speaking of *Christian perfection* and the *spiritual life*.

Catholic. But as Cardinal Wiseman pointed out, in order to bear a name it is not enough to assume it; others must give it to us, and that is the real difficulty. Good sense stands in the way, and the public voice of mankind will never give a usurped title to those who have no right to it. Infidels, as well as heretics and schismatics, have of late years talked of their teaching *as Catholic*; but in spite of the abuse of the sacred name, the same test St. Augustine applied to the pretensions of the heretics of his day stands good in our times. Let a stranger enter a town in England, for instance, and ask to be shown the Catholic church. It is the poor little chapel in a by-street that will be pointed out to him, not the beautiful church where Mass is simulated by the Ritualists.

But it is in this respect that she soon betrays her weakness; for, after all, in order to sustain this spiritual life, are not words and preaching, and books and Apostles, necessary? And how is this living life—if I may venture so to call it—to be led? how is it to be continually renewed, like the seasons in their course, if not in the Catholic Church?—which, while it subjects the mind to the blessed yoke of authority, never allows it to grow weary in a monotonous round of formal observances, and possesses the whole deposit of faith, of which the Greek Church, when it broke away from her, forfeited a part. Ever since that time her hands have been empty, even whilst her outward aspect is splendid; and whilst St. Basil, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory, St. John Chrysostom, and so many other glorious saints and doctors found in the West innumerable and worthy successors, the Eastern Church—once so famous for its learning and eloquence, now struck with dumbness—neither speaks nor writes. Her children never hear her voice, and if they want spiritual writings to excite their piety, it is to the Catholic Church they must turn. There alone can they find food for their souls. It seems, indeed, as if nothing but a spirit of blind hatred keeps up the barrier which separates the Greek from the Catholic Church; a hatred founded on no argument, and which accepts for the Church, of which it has made itself the champion, conditions appertaining to death, utter silence, and the absence of all action and movement.

Be this as it may, and whatever are the bearings of this immense and momentous subject, no one can deny that the divergencies between us and the great Greek Church have nothing in common with those which divide us from any of the Protestant sects. Protestantism has attacked all the tenets of our religion, and altered almost every one of them. It has done away with the

dearest objects of our faith, and annihilated the most sacred mysteries of Christianity. The Real Presence in the Holy Communion, penance and absolution, the honor paid to the Blessed Virgin, the invocation of saints, the veneration of holy images—all have been swept away. With the exception of belief in the merits of our Saviour, every outward token of which is severely proscribed, there is nothing in common between Catholics and Protestants.

In the case of members of the Greek Church, on the contrary, it might almost be said that the barrier of separation is invisible, so much is their faith and their practice similar to our own, as far as the eyes, the soul, and the heart are concerned; and therefore many of them scarcely feel the difference, till the day comes when they attempt to step over this barrier, and to take their share of the treasures of that Church, so like their own, and which can give them all that the latter can never supply. Yes, there comes a day when they cannot be satisfied with admiring, and enjoying, and worshipping at a distance; and an imperious yearning arises in the soul to participate with Catholics in that Sacrament of the Altar in which alone true life is found.

What does a sincere, an upright, a fervent conscience feel when enlightened as to those great mysteries; when full of the love of Jesus which they reveal, it longs to press forward, and measure the nature of the obstacles in its way? Is not every article of faith solemnly affirmed by the Catholic Church? Is not every practice dear to piety more easy of fulfilment than in their own Church—Confession, Absolution, Holy Communion? All those blessings are within reach, and is the thirst they inspire never to be quenched?

Can a soul pining for truth, faith, and love, be stopped by the addition of the word "Filioque" to the

Nicene Creed? or by the difficulty of admitting that the chief pastor of the Western Church is likewise the rightful head of the Eastern Church?—or again, and above all, can such a soul hesitate in view of the political obstacle?—the greatest and most formidable of all—the only one indeed that will prove hard to overcome, and which it will require courage to encounter.

Such were Natalie's thoughts and previsions when she left Brussels at the end of February, 1843, and returned to Paris, with her sister, fully determined to ask her mother's consent to her conversion to the Catholic Church, and convinced that it would be easily obtained. In this hope she took leave of her friends, but only for a short time, for they intended in a month to follow her to Paris.

CHAPTER IV.

1843.



NATALIE'S hopes were soon undeceived. She wrote to her friends from Paris that her own and her sister's wish to be received into the Church was as strong as ever, but they could not look forward to their mother's ever giving her consent to it. Madame Narischkin had expressed surprise and extreme displeasure when they made their request, which seemed strange after all she had sanctioned and permitted. Her refusal, however, was absolute, and founded on reasons which ought not to weigh in such a question, but which if they are once admitted are peremptory.

It was not that Madame Narischkin's conscience was opposed to the Catholic religion, nor did she dread any danger or damage to her daughters' souls in embracing it. No thought or fear of this sort influenced her. She had proved it by the entire freedom with which she had always allowed them to frequent Catholic churches and join in Catholic worship. But if, on that side of the question—the only important one on such a subject—she would have cared very little to oppose her daughters' wishes, there were other considerations which irrevocably decided her against it, and about which she would listen to no arguments.

Nothing is further from my intention than to depreciate Natalie's native country, in many respects a great and noble one. Personal and grateful reminiscences would forbid it. And I must here remark that there is a strength of patriotic feeling amongst Russians seldom

affected by exterior circumstances. We have seen it in Madame Swetchine, from whose heart forty years' residence in France, and the many ties which bound her to that country, did not diminish the intense affection she always preserved for her native land. And still more so in the case of Count Gregoire Schuwaloff, of holy memory, who, as a Catholic priest and a monk, identified his religious vocation with his ardent love of Russia. And to the end this feeling existed in Natalie, even though from her earliest childhood she had lived away from her country, even though the cornette and the gray habit of a French Sister of Charity which she wore was banished from it, even though she had detached herself completely from all the cares of earth.

It would be an offence to her memory to speak evil of her country ; but it would also be unjust to conceal the sort of difficulties which Russians had at that time, and still have, to overcome, when their convictions have become imperative, and they must act up to that incontrovertible and deep maxim, "Truth once known leaves us no option." *

These obstacles are twofold: in the first place, there is the private and personal opposition experienced everywhere by those who obey their convictions at the price of every sacrifice; and then, secondly, the official political obstacles, specially Russian,—and totally different from this kind of opposition in other countries,—because in no other nation is the favor of the sovereign and that of the government so inexpressibly important.

It is difficult for us, in this part of Europe, to realize the amount of courage—I was almost going to say heroism—required in a Russian, to brave, not only the sufferings and privations entailed by a change of religion, but

* "La vérité connue oblige."

that total eclipse of Imperial favor which seemed so terrible, especially during the reign of the Emperor Nicholas; and which appeared literally to deprive those of his subjects exposed to it of the beneficial light of heaven.

Noble examples have shown that many a Russian can scorn even such fears as these; but this was not the case generally speaking; and even high and honorable personages, in their language and attitude, betrayed an excessive subserviency on such subjects, indicating a want of moral courage, one of the most fatal effects of a despotism, the abuses of which have excited in many minds a lawless and extravagant love of liberty.

If such considerations weighed in many cases on the consciences of individuals, it is not to be wondered at that a widow, the sole protectress of her children and responsible for their welfare, was terrified at the consequences that would result from their taking the step they proposed. She had no animosity at all against Catholicism, but nevertheless she was not to be deterred from her resolution to prevent her daughters, by every means in her power, from accomplishing an act looked upon in Russia not only as one of apostasy, but also of rebellion.

She was also possessed with the idea that Natalie's affection for Olga, and the feelings called forth by her death, influenced her resolution much more than any real convictions, and hence she hoped that time and her own determined opposition would end by shaking it. Divided between the performance of what she fancied to be her duty, and her wish not to vex her daughters, she continued, with more kindness than prudence—according to her view of the question—to allow them full liberty to accompany their Neapolitan friends wherever they went, and to join in all their own pious practices.

She never objected to anything of this sort, and protested solely against the only logical consequence of what she so freely sanctioned.

Such was the state of things when Olga's relatives arrived at Paris. Full of their recent bereavement, they eagerly sought all the religious consolations abounding in it at that period, and which proved so soothing to their aching hearts. Alexandrine and her sisters-in-law did not find it more difficult than the daughters of the Duke de Serra-Capriola had done, to include Natalie and her sister in their daily visits to churches and convents. Both of them seemed, at that time, as fervent as ever, and not at all deterred by the obstacles in their way.

Even before the arrival of their friends from Brussels, they had gone to their dear convent in the Rue de Bac, and met there M. Aladel, the pious missionary priest we have already spoken of. Anxious to acquaint themselves with the history and the precepts of that religion which they were permitted to love, but not to embrace, they put to him questions which he answered clearly and simply; adding to those explanations, exhortations, simple also in their tone, but to which his deep sanctity lent something more persuasive than eloquence.

It did not require his long experience, nor that initiative power so often granted to those to whom God commits the guidance of souls, to show him what was passing in Natalie's heart. Her faith, her piety, her fervor, were visible to all who were intimate with her; but beyond the feelings common to all pious persons, M. Aladel discerned in this young girl tendencies to a yet higher love and more heroic devotedness and self-sacrifice than any ordinary piety can produce or foster.

There are plants that cannot grow in our climates, and when we look on their flowers, we feel sure that they

have expanded under a more ardent sunshine than that of our northern skies. And this illustrates what we witness in certain souls. Neither piety nor the best desires possible on our part, nor the examples and exhortations of others, can ever generate them; they are the result of a special ray of that Divine sun which gives life indeed and light to all, but whose burning touch draws a few favored souls to the most sublime heights, and enables them to overcome all earthly attractions and even the natural inclinations of the heart.

M. Aladel had the spirit of an apostle and a missionary. He looked upon martyrdom as the highest of privileges. Life was, in his eyes, a transient illusion, and the world an abyss of nothingness. He belonged to that illustrious and devoted Religious Order * which, more perhaps than any other, fertilizes the Church with the blood of its children, and continues to this day, in distant countries, to renew the heroic acts of the Saints, and of the glorious founders of Christianity.

Placed in communication with such a congenial soul as Natalie's, was it surprising that in his ardent zeal he sometimes forgot human prudence, and spoke out what was indeed perfectly true, and justified by the sequel, but not quite in accordance with the caution which her peculiar circumstances seemed to require. Was it not reasonable that, seeing in her all the marks of sincere conviction, of an entire faith in the teachings of the Church, and possessed of a thorough knowledge of her teaching, that he should have considered the alleged obstacles to be unreal, and advised her to disregard them? Was not his imprudence—if it is indeed to be so called—natural? Can we wonder that a man whose

* The Order of Missionary Lazarists, founded, as well as that of the Sisters of Charity, by St. Vincent of Paul, and governed by the same General.

eyes were ever fixed upon the immutable truths of religion, should have held cheap the displeasure of an earthly sovereign? If a whole lifetime of suffering was to result from it, would that seem much to an apostle accustomed to all the toils and pains of missionary life? Moreover, it was evidently not a question of conscience which influenced Natalie's mother in her opposition to her daughter's conversion; whereas the soul of her child was grievously troubled by this resistance, based as it was on secondary motives, unworthy of the deep importance of the matter at stake, and frivolous beyond measure in the eyes of an ardent missionary.

Be that as it may, M. Aladel did not scruple to counsel Natalie to solicit, once more, her mother's consent; but if she could not obtain it, his advice to her was, to act without further delay. The time of their departure from Paris was at hand. They were to go first to Germany, and then to Russia. If she went away, without being received into the Church, it was impossible to foresee when she would be able to take this important step.

This was indeed the case. Natalie's friends were as anxious as M. Aladel. Natalie knew perfectly well that her mother's decision was unalterable, and that it was quite useless to speak to her again on the subject. Meantime, the day but one before their departure arrived, and all hope seemed at an end. An idea then occurred to us, which, in the precipitation of the moment, we determined to carry out.

It is in "The Sister's Story" that the following episode ought, perhaps, to have found a place, for Alexandrine plays the chief part in it. I shall be excused, I hope, if, for the sake of greater clearness, I make this narrative somewhat personal.

Strong and sincere as were Alexandrine's religious feelings, she was by no means subject to over-excitement,

and had naturally a strong distaste to anything like concealment. In her own case, she had not yielded to the powerful impulses which impelled her to join the Catholic Church, until, in a most touching letter, she had solicited her mother's consent; and told her that, by the side of her dying husband, she could no longer, in deference to her wishes, delay her abjuration. But Natalie and Catherine's position was quite different from Alex-drine's when, at Venice, she wrote that letter. To disclose their intention to Madame Narischkin would have been at once to preclude themselves from the possibility of carrying it out, and perhaps to deprive themselves forever of any opportunity of so doing. This was, at any rate, what they thought, and what we also believed. M. Aladel's opinion strengthened our purpose; and without waiting to consult him again—for there was no time to lose, seeing that on the following morning they were to leave Paris—we hastily settled with them that before daybreak we should be at the door of their house, in the Rue de Ponthieu. It was agreed that we should strike our hands together to give them warning of our arrival, and that they would then come down to us and drive to the chapel of the Rue de Bac; to be received into the Church by M. Aladel, and assist at his Mass. In this way they would have been at home again, and in their rooms, before their mother's hour of rising.

Such was the wild scheme in pursuance of which we started from our house before dawn; and leaving our carriage at the corner of the Rue de Ponthieu, proceeded on foot to theirs, in order to attract as little attention as possible. The door of the court was open when we arrived, but within and without everything seemed so still and quiet that we felt frightened at the noise we made in striking our hands together. We waited breathlessly for a few seconds—no answer to our signal. Again

it was repeated—the same silence ensued. What had happened? Had their plan been discovered? Did their courage fail them? Or had they fallen asleep? We stood there a little while in dire uncertainty, alarmed at the increasing daylight, and afraid every moment of being surprised. At last Alexandrine ventured to go into the house, and up the stairs. She thought of ringing or knocking gently so as to be heard by our friends, but too softly to attract the attention of others. I was waiting outside in great anxiety, and with some rising doubts as to the wisdom of our proceedings, when the window just above my head opened, and Natalie appeared there with an agitated countenance. She threw into the street her straw hat, which fell at my feet. And almost at the same moment Alexandrine reappeared, looking much distressed, and followed by a servant, who picked up the hat. She hastily told me that our plan had failed, and there was nothing for it but to go away as quickly as possible. We got into our carriage, and told the coachman to drive to the Convent of the Rue de Bac, and during that drive Alexandrine told me what had happened.

Our young friends had sat up all night without undressing; and towards the morning, overcome by so long and unaccustomed a vigil, they had unconsciously fallen heavily asleep, so that when we gave the appointed signal they did not hear it, nor even Alexandrine's soft pull at the bell. It reached, however, the ears of an Italian physician who was travelling with the Narischkin family, and he opened the door. This was falling into the enemies' hands, for this gentleman had always shown great disapproval of the religious tendency of the young ladies. He instantly guessed the state of the case, and somewhat uncivilly begged to know what Alexandrine wanted at that early hour, adding that he

would immediately inform Madame Narischkin that she was there. At that moment, Catherine and Natalie, awakened by the noise, appeared on the landing-place—Catherine looking frightened to death, Natalie equally agitated, but still bent, if possible, on accomplishing her plan.

It was then that she opened the window and threw out her hat, with the vague and childish hope that by running down to fetch it she might get out of the house and escape with us. What she felt most in that instant was despair at the thought of leaving Paris without having been received into the Church. Catherine, on the contrary, was so terrified that the wish seemed to vanish; or at any rate she felt disposed to delay its realization to a distant future. The doctor, of course, drove them back into their room, and rudely dismissed Alexandrine by shutting the door in her face.

There is no doubt that he was quite right in what he did, and fulfilled the duty he owed to Madame Narischkin. We were in the wrong, but we did not think so at the time, and when we arrived at the convent it was not at all our imprudence that we repented of. M. Aladel, who had not quite understood the details of our plan, but only knew that he was to expect us, was chiefly struck with the consequences of our failure, and did not afford us any comfort. He said "that the early Christians were not so easily turned back by obstacles; that they persevered and overcame them. But, of course, it was not given to every one to be courageous;" and made other remarks of the same sort, which added to our regrets feelings of deep remorse.

It was indeed true that we had precipitately made our escape without saying or doing anything, and without making the least effort to compass our object; and perhaps a little more energy and presence of mind would

have carried the day. Now all hope was over; our poor friends had left Paris, and we felt as if, through our fault, they had lost an only and last opportunity which would probably never occur again.

These thoughts harassed us so much, when we reflected over the matter after returning home, that at last, unable to calm our minds on the subject, we determined to go and relate what had happened to two authorities as competent as M. Aladel. These were Father de Ravignan and Monseigneur Fornari, the Pope's Nuncio. We felt that from their judgment no appeal would be possible.

First, then, we went to the Jesuit's house in the Rue de Sévres, and waited a long time before we could see Father de Ravignan. When he came into the parlor, he was very much surprised to find us both in tears; what with fatigue, excitement, and the distress resulting from M. Aladel's reproaches, we were in such a state of nervous agitation that we could hardly speak without crying, and found it difficult to give a coherent account of what had passed. Nothing could exceed the kindness with which Father de Ravignan asked us the cause of our grief, and the attention with which he listened to our statement; but when we related the events of the morning, his countenance assumed a severe expression. Great was the relief I experienced the moment I discovered the motive of that severity. "My dear children," he said, "up to this day you were zealous and I commend your zeal; but this morning you were rash and imprudent, and I decidedly blame you."

It was far more satisfactory to be told to repent of what we had attempted to do, than to regret that we had failed. The more we were scolded the happier we felt. Never were reproofs more welcome.

According to Father de Ravignan's opinion, we had

been very wrong to advise our friends to take this step in defiance to their mother's commands. Submission to parents, he said, was such an important duty, that nothing but very peculiar circumstances ought to militate against it, and he wondered that we had ventured on recommending it. At the age of Natalie and her sister, he thought it incumbent to exercise for a long time patience and perseverance. From what we had told him of their mother's kindness and indulgence, he could not but anticipate that the strength of their convictions would end by touching her; whereas a public and rash act, such as the one they had projected with us, would have been highly dangerous, and probably have produced disastrous consequences.*

Such was the purport of Father de Ravignan's decision. It cheered us wonderfully. We began to hope that instead of punishing us for our want of courage, as M. Aladel had hinted, God had rewarded our good intentions by preserving us from the bad results of our imprudence. Father de Ravignan's words had always immense influence, but in this case we had no merit in submitting to his better judgment, for it was an incomparable relief to be delivered from an imaginary remorse.

We did not, however, give up our visit to the Nuncio, who had just arrived at Paris, from Brussels, where we had seen a great deal of him. He had often blessed Olga

* In Father de Pontlevoy's "Life of Father de Ravignan," a fact is related which would almost seem to contradict the line of opinion above expressed. But his singular prudence, in cases where circumstances made it necessary and a soul seemed to him unsteady in its convictions, was combined with a remarkable energy, when there was nothing for it but to obey the voice of conscience, and brave the consequences. In such a case everything had to give way before that paramount obligation, and his were the words quoted above, "*La vérité connue oblige*:" "Known truth compels."

during her last illness, had consoled and strengthened my mother in her sorrow, and been most kind to us all. We called upon him, not only to hear his opinion on the subject in question, but principally, in case he heard of our proceedings, to let him know exactly what had happened.

Our statement produced a much more startling effect upon him than even on Father de Ravignan. Monseigneur Fornari jumped up from his arm-chair, and his countenance—generally so mild and smiling—looked very stern.

“Indeed, my dear ladies,” he exclaimed, “you must have been mad to think of it!” And then he said the same things we had just heard in the Rue de Sévres; and added, that if we had succeeded, just complaints would have been made to him against us, and that he would have had the pain of feeling that he could not defend our conduct. In short, he showed us that we had been more fortunate than wise, which we readily acknowledged, glad as we felt to have to end that day by an act of humility instead of one of repentance.

CHAPTER V.

1844.



THAT we related in the last chapter shows that good and even holy men can often differ widely in the view they take of different circumstances, and that it does not necessarily follow that the prudence of some judicious persons necessarily involves a condemnation of the eager zeal of others.

There is no doubt that at that time Natalie was acting very much on impulse, and was so liable to influence that her convictions could hardly be considered thoroughly matured. The laws of prudence and filial duty were on the side of patience, delay, and a line of conduct in accordance with the opinion of those we had consulted, and quite opposed to the course we had so nearly induced her to adopt. And yet, is it quite certain that that venerable priest was in the wrong, whose humility—the great test of sanctity—led him to admit at once that he had been too hasty when we informed him of the opinion given by the two authorities we had consulted? In appearance he seemed to have been carried away too far by his zeal; but is it not possible that he clearly discerned the end which that chosen soul—unconsciously to herself—was pursuing? Was he deceived in his conviction of Natalie's ultimate vocation, even before she was received into the Church? May he not have felt like an experienced pilot who sees a bark entering the haven, and then—suddenly turning back—venture again on the troubled sea, daring the wind and waves, and in danger of never making again the port so nearly reached?

It was indeed with some such anxieties and regrets that M. Aladel lost sight of Natalie, trembling for her fate amidst the perils of the world's ocean, and yet hoping she would, one day, return to the place of refuge she had left. He knew, indeed, better than any one, that she was not left to float on the billows without a guiding star; and that those whom God keeps are safe in His hands.

It was from Stuttgard that Natalie wrote to her friends in Paris. Her first letters were full of nothing but her regrets for all she had left behind; but soon we heard that the four sisters had been present at brilliant *fêtes* given in honor of a Russian Grand Duchess; had been much admired, and appeared considerably amused. With a rashness worthy of our recent impetuosity we hastily concluded from the fact that Natalie had been at a ball and enjoyed herself, that her wishes and resolutions had vanished like smoke, and rejoiced that no important step had been taken under the influence of such transitory feelings.

Whilst we were forming these rash judgments about her, Natalie was pursuing the even tenor of her way; and even in the midst of an apparently dissipated life, keeping in her heart a deep remembrance of the instructions she had received, and the unchanged desire to conform, eventually, her life and actions to her faith. Not that she dreamed, at that time, of the complete abandonment of all earthly things which she was one day to put in practice. Even had the thought of it crossed her mind she would probably not have spoken of it. Simplicity and sincerity were her leading characteristics. People sometimes looked upon her as an enthusiast, because when she spoke of the soul, or of God, she showed strong and deep feelings, such as those expressed in a letter we have already quoted, which she wrote long before the

events that had recently impressed her. But there always was measure in her character, in her mind, in her actions, and in her language. She never exaggerated, never stated things incorrectly. Her voice was sweet and gentle, like her face; and whatever might be the strength of her convictions, and the warmth of her heart, she never spoke in a loud and excited way. The training of a religious life subsequently confirmed and increased this natural equality of soul, but found nothing to correct in her on that score.

During this period of separation from Catholic friends, she seldom mentioned her own interior feelings. She was the less inclined to write about them, in consequence of her sister Catherine's resolution to remain in the Greek Church. Obstacles had seemed to her arguments, or, at any rate, tokens of the course she was to take. Natalie silently adhered to her determination, in perfect uncertainty as to the time when it would be possible to act upon it, and with no clear prospect as to the future in any respect.

Meanwhile, the increasing weakness of Madame Narischkin's health led to a change of plans, which ended in making her and her daughters settle at Venice for the winter, instead of returning to Russia.

During the first months she spent in that town, no change occurred either in Natalie's outward existence or her inward life. Her convictions were, however, put to the test by the efforts of a Greek priest, in whom her mother had great confidence. She wished to combat her daughter's religious bias, not only by worldly distractions, but also by the arguments of one of the ministers of her own Church. This was right and natural, under the circumstances, and a legitimate means of defence; the only one which offered possibility of success. But the result did not answer her expectations. Natalie had not forgotten

any of M. Aladel's teachings; and had sometimes written to submit to him the thoughts and doubts which crossed her mind. She was, therefore, prepared to meet objections, and to put questions herself. Far from shaking her faith in the Catholic Church, these conversations, which her mother had expected would have that result, only served to confirm her belief, and to strengthen her resolution.

During one of these interviews, a Catholic priest was unexpectedly shown into the room, to the great astonishment of the Greek priest. He was the bearer of a letter from Miss Fraser, one of Natalie's Neapolitan friends, whose thoughts and affections were ever following her from a distance. Nothing resulted at that time from this meeting; but, later on, she renewed acquaintance with D. Daniele Canale, her friend's messenger, and numbered him amongst the fathers and friends of her soul.

That year proved a very eventful one for Natalie and her sisters. Whilst her own resolves were deepening in her heart, and her future fate seemed more undecided than ever, proposals of marriage—particularly agreeable to their mother—were made to Marie and Elisabeth Narischkin; but before these marriages could take place, the most unexpected and painful blow suddenly darkened these family rejoicings. After long years of feebleness and suffering, which had been so habitual as to cause no immediate apprehension to herself or her children, Madame Narischkin fell dangerously ill, and died, surrounded by her son and her four daughters, two of whom remained unprotected orphans, bereft of the care of parents, and estranged since childhood from the rest of their family and their native land.

This was, for Natalie, one of those blows which at certain moments change the whole aspect of life, and sweep away obstacles in a sad and terrible manner. Her sis-

ters' marriages were put off for a year, and it was decided that they should all spend that time of mourning at Moscow, in the house of one of their uncles—M. Alexis Narischkin,—Natalie's godfather,* who most kindly offered them a home.

This decision added to the keenness of Natalie's grief for her mother's death so great an anguish as to her own religious position, that it is almost surprising that at her age it did not overwhelm her; and that, left entirely to her own inspirations, she ventured to take the step which circumstances and her firm convictions pressed upon her.

We have already spoken of the number of reasons—foreign to religion—which had carried to the utmost point the severity of the Russian Government against Catholics. Every one knows that it was impossible for a subject of the Emperor Nicholas to embrace that faith without running the greatest risk, and provoking that monarch to one of those bursts of angry displeasure during which he measured neither his words nor his acts.

Alexandrine de la Ferronnays had experienced this at the time of her conversion, and yet she had not abandoned the Greek Church; and it might have been supposed that it would be indifferent to the head of the Russian Church whether or not a Protestant became a Catholic. Even Catholics belonging to other nationalities were far from enjoying religious liberty in Russia. No foreign

* Natalie's godmother was the Baroness Strogonoff, first wife of Count Strogonoff, who was Russian Ambassador at Constantinople, and mother of Count Serge, Count Alexander, and Count Alexis Strogonoff. A son of Count Alexander's married the Grand Duchess Marie, daughter of the Emperor Nicholas. Natalie's godmother—the Baroness Strogonoff, *née* Troubetzko—was her grandmother's sister-in-law on the paternal side, Madame Narischkin, *née* Strogonoff.

Catholic priest was permitted to cross the frontier unless he took the impossible oath that under no circumstances, and whatever might be their desires and convictions, he would receive any persons into the Church. Catholic worship was proscribed throughout Russia, except in a very small number of churches authorized by the government, or in the chapels of the Embassies.

This was the position of things which Natalie was obliged to look in the face—a serious one for herself, and a still more serious one to those who, on her account, would be involved in the inconveniences and dangers of an act for which they were not responsible, and had even opposed and blamed. To what grief, to what annoyance, she would subject the excellent relatives who were preparing so kindly and cordially to welcome them!—and was there not reason to fear that her sisters, too, would suffer in consequence of a resolution they disapproved? What, too, would become of her as a Catholic in Russia? Surrounded by hostile influences, prejudices, and material difficulties of every sort, how would it be possible to practise her religion? But, on the other hand, how could she forego what had been for two years the spiritual sustenance of her soul, and the reception of that still more sacred food which she yearned for every day with more intense longings?

These perplexing considerations added to Natalie's sufferings during those first days of deep sorrow. She did not want to agitate Catherine, who, quite absorbed in her grief, seemed to have forgotten for the time being her religious anxieties. It was useless to speak to her other sisters; they could not help, and would certainly have blamed, her. Once she sounded her brother on the subject, and found she would have to encounter his most decided opposition, not so much on the score of religious scruples, as on account of the displeasure such a step

would certainly cause to their relatives in Russia, and especially the pain it would give to their grandmother.

Natalie did not argue the point. What could she say in answer to those who did not the least understand the feelings which actuated her? In this trying dilemma she saw but one way of proceeding, and that was to make up her mind to act on her own responsibility and alone, so as to be able afterwards solemnly to declare that her brother and sisters had been entirely ignorant of what she was about to do; and that, whatever penalties might be attached to it, she was the only person to whom blame could be attached. She looked the future in the face, and felt that amidst the sufferings and trials she must in any case encounter, the only one she could not endure was a longer delay as to the solemn act which was to make her a child of the Catholic Church.

So far, her determination was taken; and after many ardent prayers she began to cast about for the persons who could assist her in carrying it out. It was not long before she resolved to apply in this emergency to some pious Austrian friends she had made acquaintance with that winter—the Count and Countess Revicky. They enabled her to execute the plan she had formed, which was to be received into the Church, and to make her first Communion as a Catholic, before her departure for Russia; to hasten this conclusion as much as possible, as the time was short; and at the same time to prepare for it as fervently as was possible, by means of instructions as frequent as time and secrecy would admit of. Above all, to observe a complete silence, which would shield her relatives from the risk she was about to run. This she thought as imperative a duty in its way as that of acting up to her convictions, now that there was no one in this world who had a right to interfere between God and her own conscience.

Grace was given her to perform what she had thus firmly and calmly resolved. The last days of her stay in Venice were devoted to the accomplishment of this life-long desire. The exterior freedom of action she had so long enjoyed was in no wise curtailed at that time, and she went to church as often as she liked with the Countess Revicky, who enabled her several times to receive the instructions of the Revd. Father Ferrari, Superior of the Jesuits at Venice; and, at last, after a fervent and conscientious preparation, she was received into the Church on the 15th of August, 1844, in the presence of her friends, the two witnesses of that solemn act.

Natalie wrote on that day the following letter to the Sisters of Charity, of the Rue de Bac—to them she was not afraid of imparting her secret; they did not belong to the world from whom she wished to conceal it:

“VENICE, August 15th,
Feast of the Assumption, 1844.

“For me, a memorable day! Oh, my dear friends! my dear Sisters, rejoice! I can call you my Sisters, for I am now a Catholic. My dear friends, my good Father Aladel, and my good Sisters of the Rue de Bac—you whom God and the Blessed Virgin appointed to watch over me—you can rejoice to-day, for your prayers have been heard! At last I am happy,—happy to have been taken quite into the fold, but grieved at my own unworthiness.

“This morning, at eight o’clock, I abjured the Greek Church schism. Can you account for such a grace being vouchsafed to me? Yes, you can, because you have much too good an opinion of me; but I, who know how worthless I am—how wretched, how ungrateful—I cannot understand so great a mercy! My dear friends, how I shall always remember this day! I do not feel as if I was yet

grateful enough for it. But God has taken pity upon me, and He will continue to do so.

"How can I thank you enough, all of you to whom I owe my happiness? Circumstances combined to delay my conversion till this happy day, the Feast of the Assumption. May the Blessed Virgin protect me all my life, as she has done on this her glorious festival!

"Surrounded and watched as I am, I cannot write at greater length; I wanted only to tell you of my happiness. Do, all, thank God for me."

That day, the most important of her life, was soon followed by her departure from Venice, for that distant and stately native land of hers, which she thought of with a mixture of curiosity, affection, and dread. Full of courage, and inwardly strengthened, she went on her way, keeping the secret of the great change in her life not only from her own relatives, but also from all the friends who were following her in thought and addressing to her expressions of sympathy and words of advice.

Many of them exhorted her now to be very prudent. Her return to Russia, her residence in the midst of her family, and all the actual circumstances of her position, seemed to them unsurmountable obstacles to the present accomplishment of her wishes. Natalie did not reply to these letters. She neither spoke nor wrote, and months elapsed before she broke this silence. Until the month of September of the following year, when she left Russia never to return there, and was no longer afraid of expressing her thoughts, not a single letter did she write except the one we have already transcribed. But on her way from Venice to Moscow she stopped with her family at Vienna, and had the happiness of meeting there, besides many other friends, Miss Miana Fraser and her relatives.

It would have been a great relief to Natalie to have been able to converse with Miss Fraser and to have opened her heart to her; but though her companions had no idea of the step she had actually taken, they were fully aware of her Catholic tendencies, and anxious to guard against anything that would strengthen them. Miana's well-known fervor made her an object of suspicion. The friends were, in consequence, carefully watched; and poor Natalie would have been obliged to leave Vienna without having spoken a word to her in private, if Miss Fraser had not in spite of her ill-health made an effort to pay an evening visit to the friends with whom the Narischkins were staying. The room happened to be, as she hoped, full of people, and the two friends were able to withdraw for a moment into the embrasure of a window. In a low voice Natalie said, "Dear Miana, I am a Catholic." "God be praised!" was the answer to this whisper. "But why do you go to Russia?" "I am obliged to do so, I cannot avoid it." "Are you aware of the state of things there?" "Yes." "What will you do?" "I shall be silent as long as I can, but if it becomes necessary I will own the truth." "And God will do the rest," Miana added, deeply affected by the heavenly expression of Natalie's face as she uttered those last words.

Nothing more could be said, for even this brief colloquy had been noticed, and it was found impossible to renew it. Still Natalie contrived to ask Miss Fraser, in English, to get a crucifix, which she had put into her carriage, blest for her. This was happily achieved; but they did not meet again, and Natalie did not succeed in seeing a priest, which she earnestly desired to do before pursuing her journey, and entering upon what she felt to be a hard exile for her soul.

We shall have often to speak again of Miss Fraser and

her sisters. At the moment we are writing of there was in their family circle a young girl who then for the first time saw Natalie. She hardly spoke to her at all during this short stay of hers at Vienna, but the expression of her countenance, which she used to gaze at from a distance, made the deepest impression upon her mind. "The divine fire in her heart seems to shine in her face," she said, speaking of one who at that time she hardly knew, but whom later on she was so tenderly to love and so closely to imitate. This young girl was Marie de Bombelles

CHAPTER VI.

1844-1845.



AFTER this short interruption Natalie continued her journey, relying on the grace of God which had hitherto accompanied her steps, and confident that it would not fail her amidst new trials and difficulties. Those she encountered were not, however, of the sort which in past days and in our own times have so often attended conversions. She had not to bear harsh treatment at the hands of her relatives. They were neither unjust nor unkind to her. The sufferings she endured were of another sort, and perhaps more trying than persecution to one as gentle, as amiable, as tender-hearted and generous as Natalie, and to whom it was anguish to give pain. What she had to struggle against was the influence of tenderness, kindness, and strong family affection. Perhaps also against the enervating effect of that excessive comfort and luxury peculiar to the homes of persons of rank in Russia, and little favorable to vigorous efforts and stern self-sacrifice. This, however, can hardly be reckoned amongst the obstacles in her way.

Whatever may have been said by persons who chose to ascribe her conversion and her subsequent vocation to versatility of character,—a strange assumption indeed, considering that this tendency is a proof of weakness, and therefore little likely to lead to one of the strongest efforts a soul is capable of,—we may safely assert that she was not liable to the seductions of worldly attractions; recent impressions were too powerful and too vivid to allow of it. What she felt and suffered from

was the privation of a happiness understood, and for a brief while enjoyed, as she had enjoyed it—whom God was leading by rapid strides in the path which she was thenceforward to tread with ever-increasing speed.

The privation of Holy Communion may not indeed have been felt so keenly by one who had only been a Catholic for a short time, and previously belonged to a Church the most pious members of which only approach the Sacraments three or four times a year, as by persons who have been in the long and devout habit of frequently communicating. But she had intently valued this blessed privilege during the few days it had been vouchsafed to her, and ardently longed for a repetition of the graces enjoyed at Venice before her departure.

The feelings we speak of, and which we know her to have experienced,—for the friends who heard her express them in her simple and truthful manner attest it,—cannot be fully understood by persons who have all their lives been in full enjoyment of the means of grace the Church provides for her children, and have never known the painful yearnings of souls deprived of these blessings by spiritual exile and persecution. Not that Natalie was persecuted by her family; we have already stated that this was far from being the case. But was it not the official persecution of a government directed by an arbitrary and despotic will, which obliged one so open and candid to conceal her change of religion? Natalie had no fears as to the kindness of her relatives. She would not have been afraid to impart her secret to her uncle, her brother, and her sisters, whose affection for her daily increased. The only reason which made her endure the weight of so trying a concealment, and subjected all her actions and words to a most painful constraint, was the dread of exposing her family to the effects of formidable laws; and, if she

was found guilty, of involving them as accomplices in the penalty. Whether she exaggerated to herself this danger, and conjured up unnecessary fears, we can hardly tell—the future went far to show they were not unfounded, and at that time the utmost amount of apprehension was justifiable. This must ever be the case where one paramount will reigns supreme, and human despotism enforces its own decrees in spiritual matters.

During those days of trial, Natalie felt consoled by the intense gratitude and perfect peace which attends the certainty of faith, following a period of anxious doubt. A deep inward joy at having reached an end long pursued, and the inexpressible feelings with which those who have always sought and loved the truth take, as it were, full possession of it, and compare it with all they know at last to be untrue; such were the subjects of her private prayers and thanksgivings, when in the midst of her relatives she stood in the Greek Church, where she still accompanied them,—that Church whose spiritual riches, as far as they went, she knew to be still her own, though she no longer belonged to its restricted communion, and had regained all its schism had forfeited. But it was at those moments that her longings for the worship and Sacraments of her true mother—the Catholic Church—became so ardent that they seemed to wear her out.

Meanwhile Lent was approaching, and Natalie's fears and anxiety increased. She had all along thought with dread of that period, and hoped that some circumstances might arise which would enable her to profess her faith without injuring her family. Nothing, however, occurred to change the position of things, and she felt the time to be at hand when it would be necessary to lay aside concealment, and at any risk to confess the truth. It had been possible and lawful for her—situated as she

had been—to go to church with her relatives, and stand by the side of her sisters during the long services of the Greek Liturgy. But at Easter, when they would all go to Communion, she could not possibly receive it at the hands of a Greek priest, and explanations would be required.

The whole family, with that publicity which is customary in Russia, prepared to perform their Easter duty, and a few days before the feast approached the Sacraments—all but Natalie. Her heart burning with love of God and the desire of a close union with our Lord, she remained deprived of the Sacraments and separated from those about her—even more than from her Catholic brethren—with whom she could, at any rate, unite herself by an ardent spiritual Communion.

It required courage for so gentle and affectionate a girl to separate herself thus publicly from her sisters and all her relatives at so solemn a moment; and when she saw in her uncle's face an expression not so much of displeasure as of sorrow her anguish increased. She had so often pictured to herself this day, and now it had arrived—there was no possibility of further delay—the long-deferred explanation had to be given, and all the consequences of the step she had taken accepted.

It may be supposed with what feelings she obeyed her uncle's summons, when after Mass he sent for her, and in a very kind and paternal manner reproached her for her apparent want of religious fervor; inquired for what reason she did not join her family in the performance of so sacred a duty as that of the Easter Communion; and, in order to mark his strong feeling on the subject, he added, "that really he would like better to see her a Roman Catholic than indifferent to the duties of her religion."

Her uncle's words and his emotion would have con-

strained her to declare the truth, even if she could have possibly evaded giving an answer to so direct a question. Without further hesitation she therefore related to him exactly all that had taken place during the last years; told him how long she had waited, how strong were her convictions, the resolution she had taken, and the act she had accomplished at Venice; her reasons for keeping it secret, and the imperative duty which had precluded her from receiving Communion in a Church to which she no longer belonged.

Doubtless God inspired her to utter what was right, and inclined the heart of her uncle to listen favorably to her avowal; for whilst she was trembling at the thought of what he would say, she saw that his eyes were filled with tears, and felt that he was looking at her with sadness, and no anger. Never did she forget or cease to be grateful for that moment of unspeakable relief. Though this excellent man was grieved and alarmed at what he had heard, he not only spoke gently to his niece, but kissed her most affectionately, and told her that what she had revealed to him would not prevent his loving her as much as ever, or change in any way his feelings in her regard; and, in truth, they never varied then, or at any other time of his life.

Natalie's heart was much relieved by this disclosure, which made an important and happy change in her life at Moscow, by putting an end to all concealment with her own family. At first she almost hoped from her uncle's kindness that he would help her to practise her religion. But this was not the case. On the contrary, he particularly requested her not to impart the secret except to her nearest relatives and most intimate friends. Once only—three days after her conversation with M. Narischkin, on Holy Thursday—was she able to set her foot in the French Chapel. Some persons with whom

she was driving proposed, out of curiosity, to go in and visit the Sepulchre, and for a few instants Natalie knelt down and prayed with the full fervor of her faith and love.

This was the single joy of this sort which was granted to her during what we must call her exile; for even in the midst of her family, and in her own country which she dearly loved, she felt severed from the true home of her soul. Man does not live by bread alone. We cannot do without that other food which our spiritual existence requires; when the land which has given us birth denies to us this sacred sustenance, we do not cease to love it and to hope for better days, but we cannot dwell in it contentedly, or cease to yearn for religious freedom.

M. Narischkin's conduct after the truth had been made known to him sufficiently proves that Natalie's previous anxieties and precautions were well founded. So good, so pious, so generous a man, with the kind feelings towards her he constantly evinced, would never otherwise have thought it necessary to forbid her to practise a religion which he so entirely forgave her for embracing. We cannot suppose that he would have insisted on so complete a secrecy if reasons, quite independent of religions, had not made it necessary, or that he would easily have considered those difficulties as insuperable.

Natalie was accordingly obliged to content herself with the consolation of having no longer to disguise anything from her family. This was a great boon, but it was for the time being the only improvement in her destiny. No freedom was allowed her as to the practice of religious duties, and she had also to undergo painful discussions with some of her relatives, who kept her secret strictly for their own sakes, but did not spare her reproaches and animadversions. But much as she had to sigh for, and great as were her longings for the time

when her outward existence would harmonize with that interior life hitherto sustained only by patience and sacrifice, she did not cease to thank God for all that He had done for her. Her heart was also overflowing with gratitude towards her kind relatives.

Another of her uncles—the old Count Strogonoff—had received the news of her change of religion with as much indulgence as M. Narischkin, which, considering the strength of his attachment to the Greek Church, was hardly to be expected. In addition to Natalie's singular attractiveness, she must have been gifted at that time with the power of softening, if not of dissipating, prejudices. The old Russian nobleman, full as he was of devotion to his own form of worship and aversion to Catholicism, not only abstained from addressing to her a single word of reproach, but seemed bent on showing her more affection than to her sisters, as if to testify that he in no wise resented the act she had conscientiously performed.

Her trial was meanwhile drawing to an end, the year of mourning nearly elapsed, and the two marriages, which had been postponed after Madame Narischkin's death, were now to be solemnized at Vienna towards the latter part of the autumn. Natalie had then reason to rejoice that she had resolved on being received into the Church before her departure for Russia, and that her family were now all aware of the step she had taken; for of their own accord they all advised her to return to Venice with her sister Elisabeth, who was going to live there after her marriage. Catherine, on the contrary, was to come back to Russia with her brother. Had Natalie not decided to act at once at the time which followed her mother's death, her conversion—like her sister's—might have been indefinitely delayed, and those years of her life, which proved so full of important and

blessed results, spent in useless and listless inactivity. God tunes His voice—if we may so speak—according to the amount of strength with which souls are gifted, and the degree of perfection to which He calls them. It had so long and so loudly sounded in Natalie's hearing, that she could not have delayed obeying it without incurring the risk of never hearing it again.

Full of tender affection for those she left behind, but also of a secret irresistible joy, she left Moscow with her sisters in the beginning of September, 1845, and arrived at Vienna some days afterward. She dated thence the letter I alluded to in the last chapter. It was the first in which she ventured to express openly the happiness of her heart:

“VIENNA, September 15th, 1845.

“As I can, at last, write to you quite freely, I will not put off a moment confiding to you what I should like to have told you long ago, and that is the announcement of my return to the true faith. On the 15th of August, the glorious Festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, I had the happiness of making my abjuration in the church of the Jesuits at Venice. The Rev. Father Ferrari, whom you perhaps know, directed and assisted me in the accomplishment of a resolution I felt I could no longer delay, and which I thank God He inspired me to act upon.

“I do not think you will blame me for not having followed the wise and prudent advice you gave me in your letter, but I had too strong a conviction the moment was arrived. There was no time to lose, and dangerous would have been the results if I had unhappily allowed the opportunity to escape. God in His merciful goodness removed all the obstacles in my way. I had the consolation of finding that my brother's chief objection to my wish was the fear that it would give pain to my

grandmother. I therefore resolved not to compromise any one, and to be secretly received into the Church. For my own part I accepted everything that could befall me, rather than to die out of the communion of the true, the infallible Church, against which the gates of hell will never prevail.

"You know in how wonderful a manner God has ordained it all, and have perhaps already in your heart thanked Him for His goodness to me and all of us. I am now as happy as I can possibly be, God having granted the prayers of so many pious souls who prayed for my return from that spiritual banishment which I hope never again to be subjected to, though I must say that the kindness of my relatives by far exceeded my expectations. They have been not only indulgent, but tender and loving towards me, pitying rather than blaming me for what I have done. My uncle Alexis especially has been quite an angel of goodness in his behavior to me; and old Count Strogonoff, whose severity with regard to religious matters is notorious, never gave me the least reason to suppose that he resented at all my conversion, and behaved to me in the most affectionate manner, not only when I saw him with my sisters, but also when I was alone with him.

"Poor Catherine goes back to Russia, to our intense regret, and I should have shared the same fate had it not been for my decisive act at Venice; for my other sisters tell me that they could never have otherwise ventured on the responsibility of taking me with them. They have said this over and over again. I can only wonder at God's goodness, and bless Him for it. How should I ever have resisted so long a trial?—I, who am so weak and cowardly when human respect is in question. Oh, do not omit to say a prayer for me, and to make an act of thanksgiving to the Divine Heart of our Lord and

the most Holy Virgin Mary. I wish very much indeed to see you again, and I hope God will so ordain everything, in His great goodness, that this desire may be fulfilled.

“The two future husbands arrived here yesterday. It was a joyful day for us all. We had two bottles of champagne at dinner in honor of the occasion, and it was all very lively, happy, and amusing. To-day they are all out shopping with Natalie—Friesenhof*—buying their plate, linen, etc. It is very pleasant to see so many happy faces, and to listen to nothing but pretty speeches. Everybody is in spirits, and forgets the long and painful separation which must follow. We hope that both marriages will take place this day week, and three or four days afterwards we shall all go our different ways. My brother accompanies us to Venice, and then will return here to join Catherine and take her with him, first to Stuttgart, and then to Russia. I say nothing about Miana, because I know that she corresponds with you, but I go and see her every day, and always with greater pleasure.

“Excuse this long rambling letter, and believe me, my dear Countess,†

“Yours most affectionately,

“NATALIE.”

It was during these days of preparation for her sisters' marriages that Natalie received herself a proposal of that sort, which, considering the uncertainty of her future fate, might almost have seemed providential. A Catholic young man of good family, who had made acquaintance with her four years before, and had since been travelling

* Niece of the Countess Xavier de Maistre, and wife of Baron Friesenhof, an amiable and dear friend of the four sisters.

† This letter was addressd to the Countess Lebzelttern.

in distant countries, came back to Vienna unchanged in his feelings towards Mademoiselle Narischkin. He proposed to her, and for a moment she seemed a little to hesitate as to the answer she should give to this suitor. It was the last instant of her life in which she felt any uncertainty as to the path which God called her to choose. Obstacles arose which might indeed have been surmounted, but she made no effort to overcome them; and after this transient vision had vanished she felt that her heart, her mind, and her will were in possession of a freedom never to be foregone for the sake of any earthly attachment or human tie.

CHAPTER VII.

1845.



THE painful separations which followed the wedding festivities threw a shade over Natalie's early days of freedom. It was a regular dispersion. The four sisters parted at that time never to meet all together again in this world. Marie—Madame de Valois—went with her husband to Stuttgard, poor Catherine returned alone to Russia, and Natalie accompanied her sister Elisabeth and her husband—the Baron de Petz—to Venice, where they were going to take up their abode.

We can hardly believe that one who has ever lived in Italy does not wish, in the depths of his heart, to see it again; and, whatever may be the country of his birth, can help feeling, when he looks once more on that fair land and that lovely sky, that he is returning to a loved home. In fact, like everything in nature, and like the light of day itself, that beauty belongs to all who have eyes to see it, as much as to those who beheld it from the opening dawn of infancy. It is ours as much as theirs, inasmuch as it emanates from that supreme beauty which is our common heritage and patrimony; and never can we see ever so faint a reflection of it in this world, without feeling our hearts expand and rest in a conscious sense of enjoyment and possession. It will strike us, I think, if we analyze this feeling, that however entrancing may be our admiration of beauty in this world, we are more delighted than astonished at it. Were we suddenly transported from the icy regions of the North Pole to the shores of the bay of Naples; did we look for the first

time on the full light of day, or the marvellous magnificence of nature;—there is something in the depths of our souls which would respond to all the manifestations of creative power,—and, surrounded by its most glorious sights, we should feel that they were akin to us and that our hearts were at home in the midst of them.

This thought leads to another, and suggests the idea that on the day when we emerge from the land of shades and dreams, and enter on the eternal realities of a future state, we shall experience the same feeling. Our hearts will indeed be filled with joys which they had never conceived, our eyes will behold what they had never looked upon, and our ears hear what they had never heard; but even, as we shall then behold our poor human form endowed in our Lord Jesus Christ with all the glory of God, we may, I think, reckon on finding in heaven the reality of all the earthly shadows which have charmed our sight and attracted our heart on earth. Happy those who, having kept their hearts disengaged from the thrall of earthly objects, will exclaim on that day with a thrill of unutterable rapture, “There they are, those beautiful but transient visions, once so misleading and so easily lost; there they are in their reality, in their abiding plenitude, in their transfigured and deathless splendor. We recognize and we hail what our hearts used to desire and seek. It all belongs to us now; the end is won, we are at home forever !”

But leaving aside these speculations, of too high a sort to dwell on, let us return to Venice, where we have left Natalie surrounded by all the spiritual resources she had so long pined for, free to practise her religion, and to profess the faith cherished for years in the silent sanctuary of her soul; glad also, we may add, to see again that bright blue sky which from her childhood she had loved.

This was a happy time for her, even though the recent

parting with two of her sisters and the afflicting remembrance of her last stay in Venice imparted to it a shade of sadness. Liberty of conscience and peace of heart—those priceless blessings—were hers, and she seemed to enter on a new life. Her sister Elisabeth and herself differed both as to their characters and their convictions; but as they were tenderly attached to each other, this did not affect the sweetness of their intercourse or their familiar intimacy. In her sister's husband, Natalie found a real brother, who, quite as much as his wife, delighted in her society, and felt that the happiness of their home was increased by her companionship. They never thought of interfering with Natalie's independence in religious matters, and relied fully on her delicate care not to compromise them; and if they were sometimes inclined to think her too much absorbed in the new interests which were beginning to fill her life, and too fond of the society of persons of her own faith, they looked upon it as the result of the first fervors of a convert, and hoped that time and distractions, and the absence of all contradiction, would gradually bring her back within the limits of what they considered a sufficient amount of religious observance, and a freedom from exaggeration.

At that time God was already reigning supremely in a heart full of good will, but as to the present direction and the future scope of her life Natalie had no wishes and no previsions. She was walking, as it were, with her eyes shut, and guided by the Hand of One who was leading her on, and making her advance almost unconsciously. But we may infer that the state of her soul was visible in her face; for Maréchal Marmont, who often saw her at Venice, used to call her, half in admiration and half in jest, "A little runaway from Heaven." *

* Une petite échappée du Ciel.

Providence seemed always to provide for Natalie friends well fitted to encourage her piety and further her progress in holiness. The persons whom she was thrown with at that time were of the utmost advantage to her soul, and their influence led to important results. In the first place, she saw a great deal of M. and Madame Rio, who spent a considerable portion of that year at Venice with their young daughters, then just emerging from childhood. A young and pious friend of theirs—Mdlle. Valerie Mogg—immediately appreciated Natalie, and had herself all the qualities which were sure to secure a return of affection. M. Rio's salon, wherever he might be staying, in that active period of his life, was always the head-quarters of a small society distinguished by a singular simplicity of life and an intense intellectual activity. The subjects discussed on these social occasions were always interesting, and the tone of conversation high. It was in the light of Catholic truth that every event or theory was considered.

M. Rio* was then engaged in his great studies on Christian Art; and those who heard him at that time pour forth the thoughts that filled his mind, never forgot that thrilling eloquence which so far exceeded the idea of it conveyed by the work in which he published the result of his studies—a work of great merit and value for the history of art, and especially of Italian art—but the pages of which seemed very tame to those who had listened to the burning words which used to fall from his lips.

It was a sort of sermon in its way—that wonderful description of works accomplished by Catholic genius

* M. Rio was a literary man of much genius, piety, and enthusiasm. He had been a friend of the Comte de la Ferronnays, and married an English Catholic lady.

under the influence of the Church, and no doubt suggested many a subject of thought to one who from her earliest days had been attracted towards that living and beautiful Mother, which matures the mind as well as the soul, and kindles the flame of genius as well as the fire of charity.

But this intercourse with congenial friends was not limited to the little circle we have described. It was during that year at Venice that Natalie formed one of those rare friendships which proceed from purer and higher sources than mere sympathy, and seem more heavenly than earthly in their origin and tendency. The friend who soon became so dear to her—that chosen soul, called like herself to suffer, ascend, and leave all, in order to find all that this world cannot give—was that same young girl upon whom she had made so deep an impression at the time of her short appearance in Vienna. Marie de Bombelles by her name and by her birth belonged to France; but the vicissitudes of emigration had led her father, Count Charles de Bombelles, and his brother Henry,* to Austria, where they had entered the army and remained after the Restoration. Their father had been French Ambassador at Vienna before the Revolution. His wife—the worthy friend of Madame Elisabeth, and eminently holy like that royal martyr—had died in the flower of her youth, with the most admirable feelings of piety. Up to that moment the Comte de Bombelles had been—like so many men of his generation—perfectly indifferent and careless as to religion; but the sight of that death-bed wrought in his soul something beyond a simple conversion. From

* Comte Henri de Bombelles—husband of Miss Fraser, Miana's eldest sister—was tutor to Francis Joseph, present Emperor of Austria, and his unhappy brother, the Emperor Maximilian.

that moment he became a fervent Christian, and soon afterwards a holy priest.

After the Restoration he was made Bishop of Amiens. No one who knew, or who even had only seen him, could forget this venerable prelate. The writer of these pages has special reasons for remembering this servant of God, the friend of her parents, from whom, at the age of eleven, she received her first Communion. The memory of that happy day is ever connected in her mind with the thought of the holy and kind Bishop of Amiens. The holy and sweet expression of his countenance reminded one of the pictures of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Alphonsus Liguori. Without being tall he looked distinguished, and his manners were dignified, but at the same time so simple and playful that children were always attracted to him. Wherever he went he liked to speak to them, to exhort and to bless them. It is not wonderful that those children—for whom his blessing was not only a bishop's but also a grandfather's blessing—became pious and fervent Christians, and that amongst them was found one of those pure flowers which sometimes spring from an ungenial root, but which seem the natural growth of a soil watered by the dew of Christian virtues.

The granddaughter of the Bishop of Amiens—that young Marie de Bombelles, whom Natalie met at Vienna—had from her earliest childhood longed for the religious life, and she would have consecrated herself to God at the very outset of her life if her very delicate health had not interfered with that heavenly attraction. Her father's intense affection, which made him object to part with her, raised another obstacle; and, later on,—her aunt, the Comtesse Henri de Bombelles, having lost her only daughter at the age of seventeen,—she devoted herself to the broken-hearted mother, who could find no

consolation but in her society. Beloved by every member of her family, she ministered to their comfort and contributed to their happiness whenever recurring illnesses and disabling attacks did not deprive her of all strength. Her father, Count Charles de Bombelles, had been the Chamberlain and faithful friend of Marie Louise of Austria, the widow of the Emperor Napoleon I. It has been said that she was secretly married to him; at any rate he was devoted to her, and never left Parnia till she died. Soon after Natalie's arrival at Venice, the Comte de Bombelles brought his daughter there to spend the winter. "It was then that those two souls met" (I quote the words of one who knew them); "souls so sure to understand each other—Marie de Bombelles, an angel of virtue, and as perfect as a human being can be; and Natalie, in all the first fervor of her Catholic life."

We cannot speak much of the first of these two friends; for in the solitude of the cloister, where God at last allowed her to withdraw, and where she still lives for the happiness and edification of those around her, our words might pain her humility; but she will, I am sure, bear me out when I state that the hour in which she and Natalie became acquainted was for both of them one of those blessed events in the history of a soul which influences it through life. Physical diseases are easily caught, and good health is, alas! not contagious; but in the moral order, if on the one hand evil spreads with fearful and often mortal rapidity, opposite influences are no less powerful and efficacious. If evil communications corrupt good habits, on the other hand pure and holy thoughts arise and grow in the mind as we listen to words which express them, and which flow from the heart of the speaker. And the analogy can be carried further. Bad and dangerous utterances are often whispered into the ear, and wickedness loves mystery and

darkness. Holy thoughts and virtuous aims, if at all beyond the common order, are also fond of silence, and shrink from display and noise. We often hear people say that we should shudder did we but know the evil which encompasses us about on every side. It may be so, but is it not likewise true that we should experience a thrill of admiring surprise if we could read the secrets of souls,—and by the side of those abysses of iniquity which men speak of, and into which they too often tempt others to sink, we could see those depths of purity, holiness, and humility, which God's eyes alone can scan?

The pious conversations of the two young girls we have spoken of, served to draw both their hearts nearer to Him. They corresponded with the deep feelings Natalie had often had, and touched a chord in the silent recesses of her soul which hardly seemed quite in keeping with its existing tendencies.

In her character and her heart there was, even at that time, all the energy, courage, and ardent zeal, which belongs to a great love of the poor, and instigates all the works which conduce to their relief. In that respect the spirit of Martha was strong within her, but she had to a still higher degree what we may call the spirit of Mary; that is, a strong attraction to a life of silent contemplation. To remain in profound and speechless repose, with her soul spread out, so to speak, in the sight of God, and to let that Divine gaze penetrate into the most secret depths of her being, was, as far as words can describe it, Natalie's desire, as it is that of a few chosen souls; and, almost without any explanations, she made Marie de Bombelles understand it. They were both so united in the Divine heart of that Lord they so much loved, that they did not need the aid of language to convey what they both felt. Each of them thought her friend loved God more perfectly than herself, and this belief served

to strengthen their mutual affection, their fervor, and their humility.

Reverting to this time, Marie de Bombelles in after-life wrote: "Natalie's influence was so beneficial that when I was with her I felt like a little plant warmed and enlivened by a soft ray of sunshine. We were constantly together, and people called us the two little sisters. I used to go with her to the meetings where the good Abbé Bianchini—now a Religious—and Don Avogadro—since founder of the Sanctuary of la Salette—used to invite her to help them in instructing children or ignorant adults and converts. I was always by her side at church. She looked there like a flower well suited to it. Her devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was so intense, that after she had been praying for some time before It, every earthly care or thought seemed to vanish from her mind. This was so striking, that one could not help remarking it."

Marie's strangely delicate state of health increased in her soul that devotion to contemplation and prayer which she admired in her friend, for an active life was almost impossible to her. She made most courageous efforts in the way of charity, but they were interrupted by physical weakness. Natalie, on the contrary, was in the full enjoyment of youthful health and strength; and it might not have been, perhaps, altogether desirable for her to give herself up entirely to the charm of so sweet and congenial a friendship and an amount of religious sympathy far beyond what she had ever experienced, if another intimacy, formed at that time, had not at the right moment counterbalanced this tendency, and led her to more active work.

People have thought and said that this new intimacy influenced very decidedly Natalie's decision on the most important question of her life. It may possibly have

contributed—as a secondary cause—to lead her to her ultimate vocation; for Mrs. Neville was a young English-woman, recently converted, whose fervent zeal and enthusiastic character was likely to stimulate Natalie's own ardor. But to ascribe to this friendship more than an accidental and remote connection with the deliberate, free, and well-considered decision Natalie subsequently formed, is one of those errors persons are liable to when they judge of things in a cursory and careless manner, and especially those things which of all others require a thorough knowledge, and an attentive appreciation of their bearings.

To speak, however, of Mrs. Neville's real or supposed influence over Natalie would be to anticipate on the future, for no sooner had Mademoiselle Narischkin formed these new intimacies, and secured, so to say, congenial friends for the winter, than the news arrived that the Emperor of Russia was coming to Italy, and would probably be at Venice by the end of November. At first she did not seem to foresee the great disappointment which this circumstance was about to entail upon her. She does not, at any rate, allude to it in the following letter, written to one of her dearest friends at Naples, whom she had just had the joy of seeing, on her way through Venice:

“VENICE, October 15th, 1845.

“Though I have no news to give you of our little quiet home, I will not miss this post, as my letter may still find you at Florence, where my thoughts have followed you, *con amore*, and where I wish you to hear that I miss you immensely. The first day after your departure seemed so sad and dull, even in my dear little cell,—and yet you used not to sit with me there. When our hearts feel a void, why do we not really empty them of all earthly attachments? Do you remember that when St.

Gertrude asked our Lord what He required of her, His answer was: 'I require of thee a heart empty of all creatures.' The fact is, that our hearts are not empty when they feel that void. If they were empty, as they ought to be, we should not grieve so much.

"Do let us try not to love anything but God, and others in Him! Since you went away I have had a good charming letter from dear Miana. She seems to be stronger than she used to be; God grant that this improvement may last! They tell us here that the Emperor of Russia will arrive at the end of the month. All Venice is excited about it, especially the Archduke and his surroundings.

"The night before last a messenger arrived from Vienna with orders to receive the Emperor with festivities worthy of a sovereign, upon which all the military and civil authorities are exerting themselves, and everything seems to promise that the reception will be very brilliant and magnificent. The Viceroy will come from Milan, and all the beautiful gilded gondolas of the Court will put out to sea in order to receive his Imperial Majesty, who will lodge at the Government House—the Emperor on the first floor, and the Viceroy on the second story. . . .

"I listen with a certain amount of satisfaction to the description of the approaching festivities, foreseeing how pleasant it will be to escape them. . . . And now, farewell, my own dear and excellent friend. I rely on your last promise, and you can be sure that I shall not forget mine. 'Iddio ti benedica sempre.'

"Ever yours,

"NATALIE."

It is evident from this letter that all she intended to do in consequence of the Emperor's visit was not to ap-

pear at the *fêtes* given in his honor,—which would have only been to continue what had become her habitual practice with regard to worldly amusements, except going to the theatre, which is frequented in Italy even by persons living in retirement. Once a week she went to the opera with her sister. But even this was beginning to be irksome to her, and she reproached herself in some of her letters for the reluctance with which she submitted to what was required of her in that respect.

It might have been supposed that the presence of an inoffensive young girl remaining quietly in her own home, in the town where the Emperor was to stay, would hardly have given him umbrage, but Natalie's friends and relatives deemed it more prudent that she should absent herself from Venice during the time of the Imperial visit.

Natalie was obliged to submit to a decision which seems almost inconceivable, considering that religious liberty, though it does not even now legally exist in Russia, still prevails practically in these days to a degree which makes it difficult to understand the excessive fears which even reasonable Russians then felt. No doubt they were owing to the individual character of the Emperor Nicholas, and the violent and morbid irritation which had taken possession of his mind against Catholics, ever since the Polish insurrection.

It was not without regret that Natalie accepted this banishment. Everything at Venice contributed to make her outward existence enjoyable, and she found there also the most inestimable advantages with regard to that inner life of her soul which—unnoticed by others—was daily gaining fresh strength. Her sister Elisabeth, too, was ailing, and required her care. It was a trial to leave her. She had also ceased to feel that curiosity

about new places and sights which would have been gratified by this removal.

It was therefore with some degree of sadness and reluctance that—on the 18th of November of that year, 1845—she started for Vicenza, where she was to spend the time of her absence from Venice. Mrs. Neville and her daughter, a girl of fourteen, went there with her.

CHAPTER VIII.

1846.



THE Emperor's arrival at Venice was delayed, and Natalie had to regret not only her departure but the unnecessary hurry which had attended it. But though saddened by this double disappointment and fear that her sister, though she approved of it, might feel a little renewed bitterness as to the cause of her absence, she gratefully availed herself of the resources afforded her by the kindness of the friends who welcomed her at Vicenza. The Count and Countess Carcano supplied her with every opportunity of gratifying her tastes and indulging her piety.

The following extracts from her letters will give an idea of the way she spent her time, and of her feelings during this exile:

"VICENZA, October 29th, 1845.

"Last night, during Benediction, the dark and devout sanctuary of the Madonna del Monte Bercio looked divinely beautiful. Oh! why are you not both of you here, far from the slavery of the world and all the social obligations of Venice, and enjoying with me the peace and the inexpressible happiness which can only be found in silence and retirement! How I longed to be able to transport you here; but, alas, there are impossible wishes!

"Thank you very much, Tonnino, for the dear little letter I received from you yesterday. Do you know that when I heard of the delay in the Emperor's arrival I was almost inclined to go back, but it would have been absurd to reappear for a few days and then depart again, considering I came here only to keep out of his way.

The Countess Carcano would not hear of it, and indeed I think she was right, and that it would have been rather inconsistent. But I do long to hear of that arrival, for I am always thinking of you both, and the idea that I could have been useful to Elisabeth just now pains me very much; I hope, however, that she is better and getting stronger.

"We had a dinner-party yesterday, at half-past one, at the house of the Countess Chirichati, and met four *padri reformati*, two of whom are very well informed, and conversed very pleasantly. The Countess gave me, after dinner, a magnificent reliquary containing relics of St. Francis of Sales and St. Jane Frances of Chantal. We then paid a visit to the Rambaldos, and went there on foot by so beautiful a road that I do not think I ever saw anything equal to the views both to the right and to the left. Margheritone was once a convent, and there is something bright and yet a little melancholy about it. The crest of the hill is covered with fir-trees, which give the scenery a severe and wild appearance that you will guess took my fancy.

"It was reported yesterday that the Emperor had left Palermo on the 21st, that he was to stay four days at Naples, two at Rome, and then proceed to Florence. If these previsions are correct, he is probably there by this time, and must soon arrive at Venice. On the day he departs we shall leave Vicenza. In the mean time, dear little darling, send me the books I asked for, but not the music. You can be supposed to have forgotten it. It struck me that I should be asked to play before company, and I had rather excuse myself on the plea that I do not know anything by heart; I had rather give up the pleasure of playing when we are alone than to run the risk of being obliged to do so in public, which is what I particularly dread and dislike.

"Do write to me. You do not know all the pleasure it gives me to hear from you. I kiss you both most affectionately. May God bless you, and help us all."

Four weeks afterwards, on the 29th of December, she writes more sadly, not having heard from her sister, and guessing the reason of her silence:

"My dear friends, I cannot help feeling very sad, for you have left off writing, which looks as if you were angry with me. I am sure you would neither of you have felt this of your own accord, but some charitable souls may have meddled with what was not their business, and excited you against me.

"At any rate, if you are displeased, I hope it is at circumstances over which my will has no control. I had, at least, the pleasure of hearing of you, dear Elisabeth, at the assembly at the Palfis', and that you had been in the morning to the Giardini with your husband; but I wish you had told me about it—I feel so sad when people ask after you, and I am obliged to say that you have not written to me. What will become of me, my dear ones, if you turn against me? If you knew all my heart suffers you would be sorry for me. . . . But I ought not, perhaps, to be surprised. There is no unmixed happiness, no uninterrupted peace, no delight without drawback. Oh, when will what is transitory be forever over? When shall we be where sorrows and crosses do not exist? I know that we must accept them, as they are necessary for our souls, but it is allowable to long for the day when they will be at an end, and we shall be sure of never again displeasing God. . . .

"In spite of everything, I feel it difficult not to be excessively depressed, and yet, having had the happiness of receiving Holy Communion this morning, I try to

overcome the pain I feel when day after day the post arrives and brings me no letter from you.

"I kiss you with all my heart, my dear friends, and beg you, at least, to write to me the reason of your silence."

Elisabeth's affection soon dispelled this cloud, and then Natalie began quietly to enjoy the many sources of interest which Vicenza afforded her; and it was with a degree of regret she would never have, at first, anticipated, that at the end of two months she saw the time arrive for leaving it. She wrote at that moment:

"Vicenza—at the foot of her Monte Bercio—is a perfect little paradise! If you could know what that Sanctuary of the Addolorata has been to us during our stay in this place! All I can say is, that Mrs. Neville and I cried like two little geese when we left it.

"The day before yesterday was the Feast of St. Francis of Sales, and we had a function at the Visitation which I shall never forget. It is the only day in the year when the heart of their blessed founder is publicly exposed. I kissed it four times with the deepest veneration, in remembrance of the friends who would have rejoiced to do so too. After Mass, the Superioress gave leave to several of the sisters to sit with us, and I spent a most interesting morning. These good nuns are all so cheerful, so amiable, so pleasing, and some of them so pretty, with their white bands and black veils. Amongst the number there were several Frenchwomen, who have been in Italy since the foundation of their house at Venice. They fled from Lyons, carrying away with them the heart of their holy founder. Their advanced age does not make them at all less attractive. They are beloved by everybody. I found them so good, so kind, so affectionate. Theirs is a dear order; and after reading the

lives of their holy founders, it is difficult not to feel terribly attracted to it."

But in spite of Natalie's tears at leaving Vicenza, and the drawback of not being able to share with her sister the new interests of her life, the joy she felt at returning to Venice was great. Her change of religion, far from diminishing her affection for any of her relatives, seemed to increase it. We see by her letters, that in proportion as she grows more detached from the world, and more indifferent to its pleasures, so does her love for her kindred deepen and expand. In studying her life, we discern two striking facts: first, that the heart is enlarged and warmed by the love of God; and the second, that religious vocation is not a mere natural attraction nor a resolution which depends on an effort of the mind and the will, but a real and almost irresistible call—not one, however, which it is always easy to obey, or which can be obeyed without suffering.

When we speak of vocation, we imply sacrifice—the sacrifice of something precious and dear. It is in the most intimate and tender depths of the heart that both the altar and the victim are to be found. It is an illusion to suppose that there can be a sacrifice without suffering. It is even a contradiction in terms. But we may add that it is true—miraculous as it may seem—that the suffering of a sacrifice may become, by dint of love, dearer to the soul than happiness itself. We arrive at this knowledge by a careful study of the spirit of the saints of all ages; and a worthier study it is, for those who care for the interests of humanity, than the more obvious and commonplace effects produced by blind and lawless passions in the hearts which they sway. It is not so easy a one indeed; for to pick up stones on the road is less difficult than to extract diamonds from the mine.

Natalie resumed, in Venice, all the intimate friendships she had formed before her departure—first with Marie de Bombelles and her young cousin, Thérèse, whose early death was so soon to make in that family an irreparable gap; then with Miss Valérie Mogg, whose angelic character, deep piety, and devoted affection to her friends, she deeply appreciated. But, above all, Natalie became more and more intimate with Mrs. Neville, who then acquired what was called her great influence over her young friend. This influence consisted in helping her to carry on heroic works of charity, in accompanying her to the homes of the poor and the bedsides of the sick in hospitals—in being, like her, devoted and zealous and courageous in doing good.

It is, indeed, possible that Mrs. Neville may have possessed some of the characteristics which are often remarked in persons who have gone through the trials which Protestants seldom escape in England when they embrace Catholicism. Converts, after fighting their way to the truth through long and painful struggles, often evince a strength of faith and an ardent zeal, edifying and astonishing to Catholics born and brought up in the Church, and accustomed from their earliest days to the spiritual blessings which their new brethren have often bought at the price of their whole earthly happiness—we might almost say by the sacrifice of their heart's life-blood. After winning, at such a cost, peace and the soul's true happiness, they are seized with an impetuous desire to persuade those they love and have left behind, outside the Church, to avail themselves of the blessings so dearly bought, so intensely valued. Their souls burn with a zeal not often found amongst those who from their birth have quietly possessed those priceless gifts. They also feel a singular bitterness against the authors of the so-called Reformation, who, by their apostasy of the six-

teenth century, bequeathed to their descendants the necessity of such desperate struggles to return to the true Church, and reconquer truths hid from their faith for three hundred years. This bitterness extends to the whole system inaugurated by that guilty generation; and they express their sense of it in a stronger manner than the descendants of those faithful Catholics who have received from their ancestors the sacred heritage of the truth, and the tradition of a fidelity and loyalty tried so deeply and so long, that they scarcely complain of any hardships now, and are more inclined to extol the actual justice of their countrymen.

But whether or not Mrs. Neville had any tendency to that spirit of exaggeration sometimes noticed in converts, there can be no doubt that her piety was deep and sincere, and her charity and zeal indefatigable. Natalie had the opportunity of studying in her two friends the different ways which she was called jointly to follow—that of meditation and that of action. And what does meditation mean? It means, in reality, to think—to think with intensity, under the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit sincerely and earnestly sought for.

To think of God and His works, of Jesus Christ and His life, to follow the steps of our Lord on earth, to listen to His words—above all, to contemplate His sufferings. But all have not received from God, in an equal degree, the gift of concentrating every power of thought on the subject chosen for the food of their souls. To some the effort is impossible, to most persons difficult. To whatever degree it is attainable, nothing can be more salutary than this employment of the intellectual faculties.

But there are souls—few though they be—to whom this action of the mind is almost as easy as flight to a bird, who find rest and sweetness and joy in this inward

concentration and that upward motion. Natalie was one of those in whom the supernatural gift of prayer was seconded by a natural tendency to recollection, and a lively imagination matured and disciplined by an overruling rectitude. Never do we find that at any time of her life—not in childhood, or youth, or under the most worldly influences—was her mind stirred in its pure depths by thoughts which imagination multiplies, colors, and distorts. Of all natural gifts the most dangerous,—and sometimes the most precious, according to the use which is made of it,—this faculty can be a great hindrance, or a powerful assistance, to meditation. A dissipated mind and uncontrolled imagination will be a bar to its exercise, but under subjection, and well regulated, it may become the useful handmaid of prayer and pious thought. It places before the mental sight those images which the soul seeks to dwell upon, and the more lively its action the more help will be derived from it.

Natalie had early acquired habits of thought, which prepared, as it were, her mind for the gift of mental prayer with which she was, later on, so remarkably endowed. Every morning, after Mass, she devoted a long time to this exercise, which she practised without effort, probably assisted by thoughts suggested in the pious conversations she so often held with Marie de Bombelles. It was, at any rate, from these meditations that her soul derived the strength, courage, and zeal, which she afterwards evinced in her visits to the sick poor, and the hospitals, where day after day she went with Mrs. Neville, whom she was in the habit of calling her little mother. She had by this time arrived at the exact and devout practice of every precept of the Catholic religion, and had learnt by experience all the peace, strength, and sweetness derived from their perfect accomplishment; but this knowledge and this joy were gradually leading

her still further. She began to discover and to understand a still higher life, and to turn towards it with keen aspirations.

The church lays upon all her children the obligation of obeying her precepts; but these are counsels only meant for a few chosen souls. Natalie began to turn her whole attention to this subject; and the noblest of all ambitions, that of perfection—or in other words, of a nearer, closer, and more intimate union with Jesus Christ—made her long for the complete sacrifice which alone can quench that sacred thirst which, holy and mysterious as it is, may be subject to illusions—for on those sublime heights a soul can easily deceive itself. The world little knows with what hesitating prudence these high aspirations are tested by those whom it so often accuses of unscrupulously prompting and stimulating them, and multiplying as much as possible, at all times and in all places, the number of these votaries.

But if, on the one hand, the authorities of the Church are slow to admit the existence of such a vocation, and that to a degree which is often a great trial for the soul which longs to embrace it; on the other hand, the Church can never admit that our Lord has uttered unmeaning words, and that whilst the precepts of His law are binding, the counsels He has likewise given have no sense or meaning. It believes and it teaches, in the most positive manner, that the perfection which the Divine Master recommends to some chosen souls is really their vocation, and it takes as much pains to discern it when genuine as to discard it if unreal.

Natalie had to satisfy herself and others, and especially her spiritual guides, as to this point; and in the mean time she continued to follow her usual mode of life, and apparently to enjoy as much as ever the society of her intimate friends and of some other acquaintances

she had made at Venice. The Duchesse de Berry often invited her to the Vendramini Palace, and she always preserved a grateful recollection of the kindness shown her by that Princess and her daughter, the Duchess of Parma. But in her letter at that time we find signs of the increasing impatience with which she endured the chains that still bound her to the world. To her dearest friends she wrote:

“My soul feels keenly the intolerable weight it abhors. Too keenly, I fear, for it makes it lose the merit of an entire conformity with God’s will. All this vanishes, or ought to vanish, when I think of the position of my poor sister Catherine. How often I bless God that He preserved me from a danger which might have proved too great for my weakness! How good and wise He is in all His ways, and admirable in the action and operation of His Providence! Poor Catherine!—I feel so much for her now; and so much the greater will be my joy, when with the help of God and the Blessed Virgin her struggles will end in victory. Sometimes, even whilst I pity her, I almost envy her cross; for, after all, to suffer for the love of God is a greater grace than any enjoyment. Why did I not feel this enough when I too had something to suffer and to offer up?

“But I am talking foolishly, or else, if such are my thoughts, I ought to unsay what I wrote just now about the trouble with which I endure the yoke still laid upon me. I must gladly accept everything that happens to me. Yes, I will do so, my dear little friend, if God will give me strength for it. Pray to Him for me.

“I wish you now all the joys of Easter, as I shall not write to you again till then. It is a holy time we have just been spending, and I regret that it is over. Father Curci is indeed a saint, and you may well envy us the

privilege of hearing his instructions. Mrs. Neville and I have been sometimes to see him, and he received us with the greatest kindness and charity. We wish he was not going away; but there are always thorns in this world, and the sharpest are those continual separations. . . . Oh, Sache!* what heart-yearnings it gives me when you speak of the probability of seeing me one day wearing a cornette! Oh, no!—that beautiful, touching, and noble vocation is not meant for me. There is no doubt that a cloistered life has attractions which the soul can scarcely fathom. But in everything, ‘Fiat.’ Let us follow the most perfect example of submission that ever was given, and which the Church commemorates to-day.”†

Later on she wrote: “As to Catherine, I very much hope that she will one day listen to the sweet voice which for so many years has called her. How can we resist that urgent voice? It leaves us at last no rest and no ease. Oh, how well that God who thus speaks to our hearts knows how to encompass us about on every side! He lays siege to our souls, and we feel that we must surrender. I am sure He will, one day, make Himself Master of my dear sister’s whole heart.”

Natalie persisted in her endeavors to accept, with apparent serenity, the exterior life she was obliged to lead. The irksome side of it was relieved by the society of her dear and intimate friends. Towards the end of her stay in Venice, she wrote:

“To our great regret, the Rios are gone to Gastein. We had become very intimate, meeting every day, and often spending whole days together. Marie remains here till the 9th of September. She is as sweet, as dear,

* The Russian diminutive of the name of Alexandrina.

† The Feast of the Annunciation.

as gentle, as affectionate, and as pious as ever, and she is very fond of Mrs. Neville, whom she calls her Jane Frances of Chantal. Thérèse has also been delighted and edified with her. She is herself a charming little person, whom we shall always think of with the greatest regard. We have all been very fond of one another, and it has been a very agreeable time. We go on spending the greatest part of our mornings together, and then have our little meetings at Madame Melatesta's, with the humble, saintly Anna Marovitch.* It is difficult to conceive so much greatness of soul under such a modest and timid appearance."

But under all this smooth exterior, Natalie's soul was every day more strongly possessed by that stern love of sacrifice which cannot content itself with any worldly admixture. We cannot exactly point to the day and the hour when these thoughts first found utterance in words, and she gave others to understand what was the resolution she was about to take ; but it was probably towards the end of the spring of 1846, after she had spent several months in the assiduous practice of mental prayer and the most active exercise of works of charity.

It is not to be wondered at that, at the first moment, her brother and her sisters strongly opposed her intention, and used every effort in their power to induce her to give it up. One of the greatest trials which those have to encounter who are called to make this great sacrifice is the sorrow it occasions to others. If this is the case, even in families united in the same faith and the

* Anna Marovitch was a modest and pious person, whose reputation extended all over the north of Italy, though her family was obscure, and though she tried to hide herself from everybody. But in spite of these efforts, her virtues and her writings had given her a certain celebrity. It was the venerable D. Daniele Canale who had made Natalie acquainted with her.

most perfect religious sympathy, it must necessarily be ten times more painful when such is not the case, and there is nothing to counteract the suffering of such a separation.

What Natalie went through during that sad interval which seemed to divide her past from her future life, we could easily have guessed, even if her letters had not frequently expressed it in the most touching manner. It is at that time chiefly that we find in them outpourings of the strongest affection for her relatives. She seems to love them more and more as the great love which embraces all other affections reigns supremely in her heart, extinguishing or destroying nothing but evil, or the least taint of it, in the soul.

In August, 1846, the Baroness de Petz went away for a little while, leaving Natalie at Venice. She was then under the first painful impressions which her sister's resolution had produced in her mind, and by no means resigned to its accomplishment. Nothing was changed, however, in the mutual affection between them, nor was there any reserve as to the subject so deeply interesting to both. This is evinced by the following letter:

“VENICE, August 23d, 1846.

“Thank you a thousand times, dearest Elisabeth, for your charming little letter. I wished to answer it yesterday, but found it impossible. It is nice and dear of you to tell me that you felt a little regret at leaving me even for a few days. I felt it very much also, but I try to be courageous, and overcome as much as I can this excessive sensibility. As to that other separation, which I do not know why you should consider as an eternal one, it is not as easy to me, as you suppose, to bear the thoughts of it; but I look upon it as a sacrifice—first, in expiation of my faults, and then, of thanksgiving for God's mercies,

He has been so good to me that I cannot help feeling it to the very depths of my heart, and my most ardent desire is in some way or other to evince my love and my gratitude. I know that He is not in need of what I can give, but I want to pay something of the great debt I owe to Him by making the greatest sacrifice in my power, not only that of my heart, but of my mind, my liberty, my will, my strength, my health,—in short, everything belonging to me which can be used for His service and greater glory. It is this thought which gives so much merit to the vows which are made by those who embrace the religious life. The affections which bind them to the loved ones they leave are not broken by this separation. This would be impossible, and it is not required; there would then be no merit in the sacrifice. But God who is all love, and a jealous God as to the affections of our hearts, does not forbid us to love His creatures, but only to [love them more than Him. And I assure you that in the lives of holy people, who have lived in religion, there are innumerable instances of the most touching love and constant solicitude for those they left behind them in the world, when they gave themselves to God.

“Everything is sanctified by the religious vows which, far from destroying the affections God Himself has implanted in our hearts, impart to them an increase of strength and depth.

“With regard to that subject of vocation, let me copy for you a passage from St. Lawrence Giustiniani's writings. ‘If everybody knew the happiness of the religious state, such numbers would betake themselves to that mode of life that the continuance of the human race would be arrested; Divine Providence hides it from the multitude, and it is to them an enigma which only a few can understand.’

“To me, I assure you that the religious life seems para-

dise on earth, and I cannot bless God enough that He has given me to see it. My greatest sacrifice—and God knows it and takes account of it—is the sorrow I cause you, dearest Elisabeth. But I hope that soon our dear Mary* will come and fill up my place in your house, where you would otherwise so much miss me. Do we not see in this a proof of God's goodness, and how His Providence arranges everything for the best? Till then, however, you ought to make a nice little act of virtue and generosity, by telling God that you accept this trial, and then try not to think of it, and to go on as usual with your occupations and your amusements, and you may be certain that God will reward you for this sacrifice. The great advantage of dealing with our good God is, that He always pays us a hundredfold, or more, for whatever we do for Him, and thus we lay up treasures for eternity. Do not, then, give way to grief, and make courageously your little act of offering.

"I speak in this way because I have already had experience of some of these things, but you will see by the style of my letter that they flow from my heart, and only from my heart. And now, farewell, dear Tonnino, and dear Elisabeth, whom I love, and kiss with the greatest affection.

"NATALIE."

Her sister may have thought some passages in this letter strange and exaggerated, and perhaps some of my readers will be of the same opinion, and will pronounce upon them one of those hasty judgments the world so carelessly utters. But we, who have seen Natalie realize in the most faithful manner during a long course of years the idea of the religious life, such as her fervor had pictured it in these lines,—we could not transcribe them without feelings of mingled admiration and emotion.

* Her sister.

CHAPTER IX.



ATALIE'S mind was made up by this time, but only on one point, that of consecrating herself entirely to God in the religious life; but she was in no hurry to act. The end in view was clear to her, but she was still uncertain how to arrive at it. Like a traveller who knows where he is bound to, but not the name or the form of the ship which is to convey him to his destination, she was determined to be a nun, but she had no marked preference for any particular order. In all of them there is a surrender of everything to God, and that was all she cared for. We have seen, in one of her letters, that she thought there was something *terribly* attractive in the Visitation, and, in another, that she felt deeply touched by the supposition that she would one day be a Sister of St. Vincent of Paul, and declared that this was too high and sublime a vocation for her. Then, again, she frequented at that time one of the houses of the Order of St. Dorothea,* one

* This Order, founded in the beginning of this century by the Count Abbé Luca Passi, is devoted to the education of poor children, and placed by its holy founder under the invocation of St. Dorothea, a martyr of the fourth century.

We read in the acts of her martyrdom, related by the Bollandists, that when she was on her way to execution, the pagan Procurator, Theophilus, jeeringly told her to send him fruits and flowers from the garden of her Heavenly Spouse. Dorothea promised she would. As she was bending down to receive the death-stroke, she saw approaching her a child who carried in his hand a basket containing fruit and beautiful roses. She sent the child and the flowers to Theophilus, who became at once a Christian, and joyfully submitted to martyrdom. St. Dorothea was a native of Cesarea, in Cappadocia, and martyred in that city. The Greeks have, however, forgotten her name, which has been piously preserved in the most ancient Latin Martyrology.

very little known except in Italy, and she was struck with the charm of this convent and the sanctity of its inmates. She was, in fact, equally pleased in all these sacred abodes, because in all of them she found examples of the two lives which equally attracted her—contemplative and active—and where one of them preponderated the other was not excluded.

Unlike many other persons, called like her to the religious life, Natalie was not more decidedly attracted to one than the other of these lives, and was as much inclined to enter a contemplative as an active order. This is not the case in most vocations. Just as two flowers gathered off the same tree, and whose shape, color, and scent may be identical, are yet never exactly alike, so is there a tangible difference between souls called to a high perfection. They do not all understand that Divine language in the same way; and even with regard to a particular soul, it varies sometimes according to time and circumstances and its powers of comprehension. We may quote in support of this assertion words from the pen of one more authorized than we are to speak on such a subject:

“The ways of God in drawing souls to Himself are as various as they are wonderful, nor does he always use the same way at different times with the same soul. To some it is a suggestion implied in a disclosure of His beneficence, mercy, or greatness; some external incident or visitation, or personal deliverance or mercy; or something which strikes the soul almost into the dust with the conviction of its danger and need of help; speaks to it in the words of St. John, ‘Behold the Lamb of God,’ or forces upon it the necessity of looking into the truths which concern salvation,—as if He said, ‘Come and see, come and make trial of what is here offered to you, if you will accept it.’ Others are led by example or

personal testimony of those whom they love and respect, as when Andrew said to Simon, 'We have found the Messias.' For others, God almost takes the whole burthen on Himself, and moves their heart so powerfully, perhaps at the same time giving them some powerful outward call, as to St. Matthew or St. Paul, that they are almost unable to resist it; and with some it is as if He sought them and found them, and said to them, 'Follow me.' The vocation is the same to all, though the method be different, and in all God does no violence to the human will, which may yet turn away, if it so chooses, from all these gracious ways which God has contrived for its salvation."*

* * * * *

We cannot say of Natalie, like of the great Saints quoted in this passage, that God took "the whole burthen on Himself," but we may assert that He made use of everything, of every incident and every circumstance of her life, of every joy and every sorrow, of every friendship and every disappointment. Not one of these but had its share in revealing to her the reality of that appeal which never was more promptly urgent than when she tried to resist it.

But that period of struggle was over. Her resolution to enter the religious life had already been known some months to her family, when towards the end of 1846, her brother, M. Alexander Narischkin, arrived at Venice. His opposition from the first had been less strenuous than that of her sisters, and after he had seen and conversed with Natalie he ceased to feel any irritation on the subject. Still he was anxious to postpone her decision, and proposed to her with that view to visit Rome

* Father Coleridge's Public Life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Vol. I., chap. ix., page 126.

with him. But he soon perceived that nothing would be gained by this delay, and that it would be better not to grieve his sister by useless opposition. He therefore contented himself with asking her to choose amongst the Catholic religious orders the one he himself preferred, probably the only one he knew.

She would have been inclined to agree to his wishes, whatever had been his choice, but when he named the Order of the Sisters of Charity, her own dear daughters of St. Vincent of Paul, she felt that he was forestalling her dearest desire. It was, however, agreed upon between them that nothing would be decided until, after a careful examination of her own soul, and in the opinion of those whom she would consider the most competent advisers in such a question, she was found worthy and capable of embracing so high a vocation. The holy and admirable Father Aladel, with whom she had continued to correspond, had indeed always encouraged her to think of it; but Natalie's humility stood in the way of the joy which this idea would have given her. In one of her letters to the good missionary she says: "Can I indeed aspire to the happiness of belonging only to God?—of being associated with those who have never lived in error, and to be united to them in all their works of charity? I secretly felt this desire, but I did not venture to indulge it, but rather looked on this thought as a presumptuous one, and yet you tell me to hope for so great a blessing. Then do let me know how I ought to proceed in order to arrive at this highest object of my wishes. It is indeed the life of the Sisters of Charity I long for, and it is with them that I should like to devote myself to the service of the poor. It is quite true that this is the vocation which most attracts me, but at the same time it is also true that I feel myself quite unworthy of it."

These scruples did not long detain Natalie. But if, on

the one hand, the way seemed to become easier to her, one after the other a succession of sorrows saddened the short time she had still to spend with her relatives, and made her feel so many and such different emotions, that they seemed to have been purposely intended to make her feel the whole extent of her affection for those she was about to leave, and the strength of the earthly ties she was about to give up for God.

In the first place, her sister Elisabeth's child died suddenly in the midst of all the rejoicings at its birth. Then she heard that Valerie Mogg was dying at Milan, where she had gone with M. and Madame Rio, and soon afterwards came the news of the death, at Vienna, of the young and charming Thérèse de Bombelles, the cousin of her dear friend Marie. And lastly, her beloved *little mother*, Mrs. Neville, was most dangerously ill at Venice. As the letters which refer to the illness and death of her sister's child and the recovery of Mrs. Neville are very interesting, and amongst the last which Natalie wrote before leaving the world, we transcribe them here :

“VENICE, November 23d, 1846.

“An instant has been enough, my dear friend, to make us pass, after twenty-four hours of joy, five days of sorrow and anxiety, to which were added the suffering of having to play a part in the presence of poor Elisabeth, who does not yet know her misfortune. That child was really as beautiful as an angel, and that on the second day of its life, which I am told is not generally the case. I really never saw a more lovely little face. We were all saying that he was too perfectly beautiful for this world, and that God would make of him either an angel or a saint, and now he has actually taken his place amongst those who surround our Lord's throne in heaven, and shares the celestial glory of the angels in paradise. Yes-

terday he died. The doctor had fortunately thought of having him moved into my room before his sufferings had begun, and so poor Elisabeth did not witness them. She had submitted with a breaking heart to her husband's wishes, and in every way her gentleness and obedience have been very touching. We nursed and watched that precious treasure day and night; I with more than an aunt's affection—all of us with the tenderest and saddest feelings. You can imagine how great our anxiety became when the danger increased. At last all our illusions vanished like a dream; God has taken to Himself this dear little one."

"Friday, 27th.

"I have found it impossible to finish this letter till to-day. . . . Our poor Elisabeth knows it all now. She heard of this affliction with great gentleness and resignation, and the doctor is better satisfied with her state than he had ventured to hope. How God helps us in everything! But another event of a different sort is breaking our hearts; knowing as you did our dear Valerie, and loving her as much as I do, you will feel it very much. On the 19th, the Feast of St. Elisabeth of Hungary, poor Madame Rio wrote to us, in the deepest anguish, that there was no hope for the life of that angel. On the 6th she had fallen ill with a fever, and on the 19th was dying. She had received Holy Communion that day and commended herself to our prayers. You may easily imagine the intense grief of the good Rios. I send you their letter that you may pray for them all.

"My dear Mrs. Neville is also confined to her bed, and during the last week has been very ill. Sophy Greville—I suppose you know who I mean—died the other day, in Scotland. God has speedily rewarded her faith and her piety. She had not yet had the courage to break to her family that she was a Catholic, and God in His mercy

spared her the struggle she had so much dreaded. Oh, let us always bless Him, dearest Sache! How we ought always to pray to be grateful!—grateful to a degree that absorbs every other feeling!

“All the La Ferronnays have returned to Paris. Alexandrine went to Stuttgart, and has met there Marie and my poor dear Catherine. Oh, may God lead her onward! Perhaps she will come to Venice if I go away. We may be sure that our good God will ordain everything for the best. My brother is very kind to me; he wanted me to go with him to Rome for the holy week, and he offers to take me, next year, to Paris. I leave all the future in God's hands; I only wish to know what is His will, and am ready to accept it according to the judgment of those who have authority to speak on that subject.

“Father Ferrari is making his retreat, and he will bear my future in mind. Afterwards he will see my brother, and then everything will be settled. Pray that I may be myself thoroughly resolved to accept everything.

“My dear, darling friend, I kiss you with the tenderest feelings.

“NATALIE.”

Sophy Greville! I was surprised to find that name in the letter I have just transcribed, but as a remembrance dear to my heart has thus been unexpectedly recalled, I may be perhaps excused for interrupting a moment the course of this history to say a few words about this departed friend.

It is now thirty years since she died. This long lapse of time has softened, it may be hoped, the displeasure her relatives felt when, after her death in 1846, they discovered by her papers that a few months previously she

had been received into the Catholic Church at Baden. The resentment which could not be directed against her whom death had removed from this world, was strongly directed against the two friends who had been present at her abjuration, and whom her parents supposed to have been accessaries to her change of religion. Now, after so long a lapse of time, I may be allowed, without fear of wounding or grieving her family, to say a few words about her conversion.

When, in 1844, I made acquaintance with Miss Sophy Greville, she had already been for many years longing to be a Catholic. To her intimate friends, and especially to the Grand Duchess Stephanie of Baden, with whom she had spent from childhood the greatest part of her life, this desire was well known. But she knew that the Grand Duchess, to whom she had been entrusted by her parents, was on that account in a delicate position with regard to her, and found it difficult to second her wishes without appearing to betray their confidence. She had therefore resolved, whenever an opportunity presented itself, and she could summon up sufficient courage, to act so as not to commit her royal friend's responsibility. It was long before the day and the hour she was watching for arrived.

In 1846, towards the end of the summer, the Princess Marie of Baden, then Marchioness of Douglas and now Dowager-Duchess of Hamilton, and at that time a Protestant, was about to return to Scotland after a stay of some months in Baden. Sophy Greville was to accompany her to spend the rest of the autumn at her home in the country, and then pay a visit to her own parents. It was not the first time that she was leaving the Grand Duchess, to whom she was most tenderly attached, and her absence was not to be longer than usual. Still she felt this time an insurmountable desire to accomplish

before her departure the act she had so long wished to accomplish, and to become a Catholic in reality, as she had long been one in heart. I was staying at that time in Baden, and Alexandrine was with me. She asked us to advise her, and we felt somewhat in doubt what to say.

She was twenty-six years of age, so that on such a subject she was certainly free to act on her own convictions. She had long been separated from her family and, as it were, adopted by a French Catholic Princess, who, though she did not feel herself at liberty to promote her change of religion, would not, of course, object to it. At the same time, we did not think it a well-chosen moment for so important a proceeding. It so happened that Baden was that year even more full of bustle and excitement than usual. Sophy Greville filled, in some sense, the position of the Grand Duchess's lady-in-waiting, and the Princess was always anxious to have her with her when she received company, for her beauty—the most perfect ever seen—made her the ornament of all the *fêtes*, and a general object of admiration.

She cared very little for that wonderful beauty of hers. There was something grave, serious, and almost sad in her countenance. A vague presentiment of her early death may have inspired this depression, and also led her to persist in the resolution of hastening the act she had in view, and in spite of every obstacle to accomplish it on the last day but one she spent at Baden.

There was to be that day a long drive in the afternoon and a grand party in the evening. Sophy was obliged to join in all this dissipation; but she contrived to secure two hours towards the close of the day, when she made her escape, and came alone to the little Church of the Convent of the Sepulchre, where we had promised to meet her.

There we saw her kneel before the altar, where she

was conditionally baptized, and then received into the Church. Never can the remembrance of that sight fade away from my mind: those beautiful eyes bent down, that lovely complexion, the outline of that matchless face, that perfect figure, and the beauty of the soul in such rare and wonderful harmony with that of the body. How little we thought, as we gazed at her with admiration and emotion during that hour stolen from the gay world, that it was so soon to be followed by the day which was to open to her the gates of eternity!

Forty-eight hours afterwards she left Baden, and as she passed through Paris went to confession and made her first Communion. It was her viaticum; for as soon as she arrived at Brodick Castle, in the Isle of Arran, she fell ill with typhoid fever, and died in a few days, deprived of all outward religious assistance—for in Arran there was neither Catholic chapel nor priest—but sustained by the graces which God Himself gives to those to whom human ministrations are denied.

She rests on that wild sea-shore; and when, many years afterwards, I visited her tomb, the memory of that gentle and courageous soul remains in my mind like a dear and beautiful vision of the past, and it is with a sweet and blessed confidence that my thoughts follow her beyond the grave.

CHAPTER X.

1847.



AFTER a digression—which the mention of a familiar and much-loved name in Natalie's letters seemed to justify—I return to her own history, and the circle of friends she loved so well:

“VENICE, February 12th, 1847.

“It is a month, dear friend, since I received your last letter, and I have not been able to find time to answer it. You will not resent it, I know, when I tell you that, between my brother and my dear Mrs. Neville, who cannot yet leave her bed, I have been fully employed.

“She had received, a fortnight ago, permission to have Mass said in her room, and for the first time this took place on the Feast of St. Francis of Sales. It was, as you may well imagine, a great day for her, and she made an effort to get up—but alas! it was too soon, and she became much worse, so much so that the day you wrote to me was one of great trial for us all. She was seized with a virulent fever, and for some hours we feared that she would be taken from us. But God had pity on the intense grief of all those who had learnt to appreciate her, and especially on her poor child, and He vouchsafed to hear the prayers which her numberless friends addressed to Him day and night. I do not think there is a single convent in Venice, and even in all Italy, where her recovery was not ardently solicited: the Nuns of the Visitation; the Daughters of St. Francis of Assisi; all the Jesuits at Venice, at Parma; the Sisters, the Ursulines, and the Nuns of the Sacred Heart at Vicenza;

the Servites of Monte, at Bergamo; the Benedictines and the Dominicanesses—in short, everywhere in all these Italian towns which she had visited in her travels. God had given her friends who, in these days of sadness and anxiety, offered—to obtain her cure—their fasts, their watches, their mortifications, and their prayers. I assure you that it was very touching to see so many messengers arriving from all those religious houses to inquire after her. The holy founders and patron saints of all those different orders were indeed fervently invoked in those days of alarm. . . . The good Jesuit Fathers here, who are quite angels of compassion in such terrible moments, spared neither prayers, encouragements, nor consolations. At last our fears for her were a little quieted, when we received a heart-breaking letter from Miana Fraser, asking earnestly for our prayers—but alas! it was too late; and even whilst we prayed, a secret presentiment made us offer up those prayers for the soul, as well as the body, of dearest little Teresa.

“On the following day a second letter announced to us the terrible news of the poor Bombelles’ loss. Oh, my dear little Sache, how mysterious are the ways of God’s providence! Teresa’s poor mother has not yet been able to shed a tear since the hand of God, merciful even when it strikes, has so severely tried her. One can easily conceive their excessive grief. That dear child was beloved by everybody. We are all in great grief at her death, but one cannot speak of one’s own sorrow, with the thought of what her father and mother are suffering!—and Mita* and Miana, we feel so much for them, though those dear good souls forget themselves to think only of their sister.

*The Marchesa Gargallo, third sister of the Comtesse de Bombelles.

"In the midst of all this sadness, Valérie—who was dying, and received the last Sacraments a few days ago—seems to revive, and my dear Mrs. Neville also. Oh! who would ever have thought that that charming Teresa, who seemed the picture of health, would die before them, and that Miana and Marie, both so delicate, would also survive her?

"One cannot feel enough that the human mind cannot fathom the secrets of God's ways! . . . I do not know what to tell you about Catherine—I am always thinking of her, and painfully too—for I know well what she is going through. Oh, if she could know what she loses, and what she could so easily secure!

"My dear little Sache, let us thank God for all His graces, and try to be very faithful to Him. Farewell, I love you most dearly.

"NATALIE."

"VENICE, Thursday, April, 1847.

"In vain have I tried during the last fortnight to find time to write to you; the occupations of these solemn days of holy week left me no leisure, and yet I had some very interesting news to tell you about my dear sick friend, who had been much worse again since my last letter. Two days after I wrote to you her state became so alarming, and all the symptoms of decline began to be so evident, that the doctor declared that he did not believe that any remedies could arrest it. You may imagine the consternation of all her friends. She was decidedly in a consumption, and gradually sinking. All hope seemed at an end. Our anxious hearts clung to the idea of a miracle. Late one evening I had been reading the account of three wonderful graces of this sort obtained through the intercession of the Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. I said to myself that if I had a lively faith I

should begin a Novena, but *that it was too late*; the illness was too advanced, and it was true that she was in a state of complete prostration, unable to digest any food—and on the evening of the 23rd, the doctor pronounced her case to be quite hopeless, and said it was useless to continue his visits. . . . On the 24th, at nine o'clock in the morning—I had not yet gone out—a gondola stopped at our door. Stephanie Neville rushed breathless into my room, and implored me to come down immediately. She had something to show me, which she could not bring upstairs.

“I followed her, and found—. . . what do you think I found in the gondola?—my dearest little mother, miraculously cured, and coming full of the deepest emotion to announce it to her great daughter! This favor had been obtained on the tomb of St. Méchitar, at the Convent of St. Lazarus, where she had asked to be carried. All the details you will hear when you come to Venice. I write these few lines only to make you more impatient to be with us. I long for that moment, and hope you will be able to give us a good many hours. Soon we shall meet—what a delightful thought! May God ever bless you!

“N.”

This book is meant for Catholic readers, amongst whom I may safely conclude there will be no disposition to disbelieve or cavil at the statement of this miraculous event. But even if this book is to be read by others, I do not see why I should hesitate to mention so remarkable a fact, attested as it is by one of the most truthful persons I ever met with, and the circumstances of which preclude any supposition of mistake or delusion. Nothing could even suggest such a silence, except the well-known habit of mind which exists in the world—reject-

ing, against every law of justice and history, all testimony tending to a practical evidence that God is the Sovereign Lord of nature. Strange infatuation indeed which leads Christians—for I speak of those who admit the authority of Holy Scripture—to deem it impossible that a relic, that is to say some portion of the mortal remains of a servant of God, can operate miracles such as those which God permitted *the shadow* of St. Peter's body to accomplish in the presence of an assembled multitude.

Every one has, of course, a right to doubt as to the truth of a particular miracle, and it is a duty not to yield too easy a belief to such statements. Hesitation is right, investigation desirable, and any one may be justified in saying such and such a fact is not true—but how can Christians say such a fact is not possible?

People answer, I know, there are often false miracles. We do not deny it—we even admit that, to a certain degree, Catholics are in danger of being thus deceived. The owners of valuable diamonds are liable to be deceived as to the genuineness of some of their possessions. Not so the individual who never has had anything to do with precious stones. The former, however, are tolerably keen-sighted as to their purchases, and a man would be laughed at who renounced all his treasures from the fear of an accidental deception.

The time which followed Mrs. Neville's illness and her recovery proved the most painful and trying of Natalie's life. The hour of separation was drawing near, and God only knows what she suffered in parting with all those she loved.

Her brother had preceded, instead of taking, her to Paris, but it was arranged that she was to stay with him when she arrived there. It was thought, perhaps, that that stay would be prolonged; and notwithstanding the

openness with which she had spoken to her relatives, they may have indulged a hope that she was not leaving them forever. Not that the measures she had taken previous to her departure justified such an expectation, but those not intimately acquainted with the work which had been going on for two years in her soul, probably imagined that her resolution was not irrevocable; they may even have fancied that the very sight of Paris would modify her inclinations, and that she would hesitate before exchanging the gay world for a religious house.

Natalie did not take pains to undeceive them, even after the 18th December, 1847—the day on which this final separation took place at Venice. What was to her the anguish of this parting will be seen in the following letters. A month afterwards she wrote:

“I will not speak of my weakness at the moment of that great separation, the only sacrifice which has really cost me anything. I felt that inward conviction which tells us that we are really doing God's will, and yet that we are quite free and acting voluntarily, but my heart seemed rent and breaking into pieces.”

In these words she seems unconsciously to express the same thought which we find in the following passage of St. Augustine:

“Give me, my God, by love of Thee, the will to despise all other love, and by Thy sufferings the will to bear every suffering.”

These strong feelings of tenderness, these regrets, and at the same time that determination of the will in apparent contradiction with them, and surmounting them all, are found in every one of her letters to her sister after their parting. We see in them also the affectionate desire to console and cheer her in every possible way, and to try to prevent her missing her too much. We can follow her step by step during this journey, and witness the

emotions of the days which preceded the decisive moment when she entered on her new destiny, and began her life of order, peace, and obedience.

The following note was given to her sister after her departure, which seems to have been so arranged as to spare her the anguish of a final farewell:

“MY DEAR, *dear* ELISABETH,

“I need not tell you that it is with a breaking heart I leave you. No one knows what I have suffered during these days of constraint and effort, during which I used often to keep out of the way to hide my tears. No one knows what I suffer in thinking of what you will now hear, but God takes account of it all: without that thought I must have given way. You will perhaps be surprised that I did not try to be more with you and enjoy your society during those last days, but I felt that I might break down, and would have broken down if I had done so. For God’s sake, and for the sake of your love for your husband, and also from affection for me, do not grieve too vehemently over my departure. You will see, later on, how happy I shall be (I cannot say that I feel happy just now); but make, on your side, this sacrifice to God, and be sure that it will bring its reward. The only thing that can console me for having left you in this way will be to hear *as soon as possible* that you are reasonable, and that you accept distractions. I beg you to do so, dearest Elisabeth, in the name of all whom you most care for. Do not, at this last moment, refuse me that consolation. I cannot express what my heart feels for you—for both of you. God grant that it may not be in vain for your future welfare, which will be henceforward my most constant solicitude. May God bless you both! I cannot write any more, I really have not strength to do so. Oh, give me the consolation of knowing that you do

not grieve too much—that your health does not suffer! Farewell, my dear ones! Once more, may God bless you!

“NATALIE.”

Natalie was accompanied in this journey by a confidential friend of the Narischkin family, Mademoiselle Alexandrine Zamiatine. She did not enter thoroughly into the feelings of her young companion, but she was much attached to her, and had willingly consented to travel with her to Paris. She did not leave Natalie till the day when the latter entered as a postulant the house of the Sisters of Charity at Montrouge:

“PADUA, 5th October.

“We are stopping at Padua for two hours. My dear friends, my heart and my thoughts are continually with you at Venice, in your room, from which I cannot withdraw them. H—— grieved me by saying that Elisabeth had expressed sorrow for a few words said in past days, and some little disputes between us of which I have truly lost all recollection. On my side, I have given you so much pain that I could not get over it if I was not certain that you forgive me. Thank God, we have now been living so long pleasantly together that our happiness was complete, and hence the pain of separation very bitter. I have, at any rate, the satisfaction of feeling that I have made—for the love of Jesus dying on the cross—a real sacrifice; so great a one that I could never have measured it beforehand, much as I suffered in anticipation! But this is enough about myself.

“I should like to know all you are doing. Once more I implore you, dearest Elisabeth, to promise me that you will accept all the little pleasures that are offered to you. You must take the greatest care of your health, first for Tonnino's sake, and then for mine. I do beg of you to

do so. No, you will never know what my heart endured during that terrible morning, and how I felt as if it was breaking when I came out of your room. Well, it is God's will. Let us ever love each other dearly in Him. It is the only way of remaining united in absence. I love you, I dote upon you, I bless you, and with all my heart I embrace you both.

“Your affectionate Sister,
“NATALIE.”

“PARMA, December 20th, 1847.

“MY DEAREST ELISABETH,

“I arrived last night at Parma, and you know what I found.* The grief is so deep and intense that it makes one forget one's self. The only thing that can never leave my mind is the thought of you both.

“In the midst of the general sorrow and the grief so peculiarly great to our friends, they have received us with open arms, and instantly sent for all our things from the hotel, insisting that we should sleep at the palace. They wanted us to stay till Christmas, but this would have been impossible in any case, and, in the present position of the poor Bombelles, not considerate.

“You could hardly conceive the affliction which is felt here. Poor Marie can hardly keep up. She exerts herself, but is quite exhausted † and overwhelmed with sorrow. The regrets of all this household are very touch-

* The Archduchess Marie Louise, Duchess of Parma, had died the day before.

† The amount of feeling and regret for this Princess seems almost surprising to those who have only known about her what history has recorded. It tends to prove that if, as is often said, people are seldom heroes to those who see them in every-day life, others, whose conduct in political affairs may have been judged severely, have sometimes qualities which endear them greatly to their friends, and make up for the public failings they are accused of.

ing. Marie will return to Venice immediately after her father's departure. He has to accompany the Archduchess's remains to Vienna. What a sad duty! Marie will have at least the consolation of being with her aunt and you. She has promised me to take good care of you. I set off, dear Elisabeth, at ten o'clock this evening. Every day carries me away further from you, but my thoughts turn to Venice at every hour of the day and the night. I should always like to know what you are both doing. At night, in the *diligence*, I think of you, and if I feel the cold I rejoice that you are not exposed to it.

"Poor darling!—I hope so much that you go out, and that you are as well as when I left you. But I must start without hearing it, for I shall not receive a letter from you till Chambéry. Poor Marie! What a complete change it is, and how sad it seems not to be able to be of any use to her. But it is impossible. I must go. I add this sacrifice to the others. I offer it to God, and so does she. Farewell; I kiss you both. Your shawl, your little rug, your furs, are very useful, for it is snowing and very cold.

"NATALIE."

Natalie's short apparition at Parma was to Marie de Bombelles like a heavenly vision in that hour of sorrow. She wrote that her friend had no longer the look of one escaped from paradise, as had been said in former days, but seemed an angel in possession of heaven; she had broken the last chains that bound her to the world; she was on her way to the haven of peace; she was beaming with joy.

"TURIN, Friday, Christmas Eve, 1847.

"MY BELOVED TONNINO AND ELISABETH,

"My days, my time, my life, are still entirely occupied with you. I can think of nothing else, and of my, as yet

unsatisfied longing for tidings of you. The snow has, alas! detained me here, and though I have the pleasure of spending these holy festivals with dear Maria Fassati,* who is an angel of goodness and kindness, and takes me everywhere, I cannot but feel intensely the loss of so many days during which I cannot hear from you. Oh! how I do long to know how you are and what you are doing. Our good God has required of me so great a sacrifice that I do not think He will increase it by allowing my dear Elisabeth to be ill. Moreover, I know, I feel that this sacrifice will be rewarded, and greatly rewarded—I mean by the accomplishment of your wishes. I am sure our good God will grant it to my prayers.

“Just now A. Z. (her companion) almost made me burst into tears; but the fear of grieving her made me control my feelings. She has amused herself, thinking to please me, by arranging a sort of Christmas-tree, to which she had fastened a little parcel, and written upon it ‘From Elisabeth.’

“Oh dear! I have often to rub my eyes in order to realize the fact that Elisabeth is not near me—that I am so far from her!

“To-morrow, when I receive Holy Communion, the Divine Infant Jesus will make me forget all else. He can do so, and His goodness and mercy have never failed me; He will comfort me, I know. I wonder if you were at Mass on St. Thomas’s day? During every hour of the day I kept following in thought all the course of your daily life. Do tell me everything you do, even your little worldly concerns. We wondered whether you went on Wednesday to the assembly at the Palfis, and if your little Paolina had dressed you nicely. Write about all that interests you,—politics too. Is General

* M. de Maistre’s daughter.

Martini arrived? Has he been gracious to Tonnino? These excellent Thurns will have left nothing undone in that respect. Oh, how good they were to me! I shall never forget it. Tell them so, and that I shall always love them."

"Saturday morning.

"A happy Christmas, my dear friends! I have been to Mass with the Duchess de Forli.* Mannina† had been dreadfully ill; but, thank God, she is better to-day. Yesterday I went to kiss her in her bed. She looked so pretty, so interesting! She cried very much when she saw me. Poor Mannina!—God grant that she may recover, and that her child may be spared to her. I kiss you both with the tenderest love. Please be very merry on New Year's Day. I will pray for you on that day. Pray also for me and love me."

"CHAMBÉRY, Wednesday, December 29th, 1847.

"Thank God, my dear friends, I have—at last—received your letters! Oh! how long!—how interminably long—the time has seemed to me! It made me anxious and sad, though I felt that God, who is infinitely good, would be merciful and comfort me. And such dear, good letters they are! God bless you for them! I cannot pretend they did not make me cry, for you will perhaps see when you read this letter that I am crying even now; but they have made me happy. And this morning at Mass I again offered up my sacrifice to God. I love to do so whatever pain or heart-aches I may feel. After all, it is so little when I look at the image of Christ crucified, and think of those words, 'He was offered because it was his own will.'‡

* Sister of the Duchess de Serra-Capriola.

† Her daughter, the Countess of San Guliano

‡ Isaiah liii. 8.

“Thank you so much for your prayers, for I have great need of them, and I like to think that you help me in that way. I also say, measure my affection by your own, as you tell me to measure your regrets by those I feel myself. You will understand then how much I love you, and what I suffer.

“Sachinka received me with open arms. She came into our room, at the hotel where the diligence had left us in the middle of the night, before we were hardly up; and as the journey from here to Paris is too long to be accomplished before New Year's Day, we have resolved to remain and spend it here. . . . Oh, my dear ones, try to spend that day as well and as happily as possible! I feel so much all the kindness that people show you, and I hope that on that particular day they will flock to you and make much of you. I am longing, since yesterday, to find some opportunity to send you, dear Elisabeth, a pretty dress of Chambéry gauze. It will be admired at Venice as something new, and as in order to please me you mean to go out, I think you deserve a pretty gown. Do not be anxious about my little finances. I have more money than I want for the journey, and as to the future you need have no fears. . . . I try by degrees to conquer my depression, but I do not yet succeed very well. God can make me smile sometimes; but not distractions, not my friends—oh no, believe me, none of them—can change or even diminish the strength of my feelings. . . . Our journey, thank God, has been very successful. We did not suffer at all, even in crossing the Mont Cenis. I felt sure it would be so, knowing the prayers which were made for us. . . . Let us pray and hope a great deal! I never had expected that the effort of leaving you would have been so great. But I bless God that He has helped me to make it, though as yet only materially, for I have to renew every day and almost every moment the acqui-

escence of my will. . . . Do not say that it is those who remain in the same place, surrounded by remembrances of the past, who suffer the most, whilst those who travel have distractions. Think, rather, that every step which carries one further is a new thorn to a wounded heart. I assure you, that much as you speak of your regrets, mine are still greater, and make me suffer as I never in my life have suffered before. I often bitterly reproach myself for my want of courage, but God pities it, I am sure.

“Now in answer to your questions: No, I have not left behind anything I wanted to bring away except the little picture of St. Teresa, which I had not room for. If the G——s will take charge of it I shall be very glad to have it. As to the books that are in the *Prie Dieu*, I thought Stephanie would like them. But all those on the little shelves, or in my room, or in the drawers, I left at your disposal. There is also some linen in the drawers. It pleased me to think that Elisabeth cared to keep my little cushion, and it made me regret that I had not left her some of the things I was in the habit of using, but all I had of that sort seemed too ugly to give her. Did she find in one of the drawers a sachet containing some small embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs that I was very fond of? They might indeed be of some little use to her.”

“CHAMBERY, January 2d, 1848.

“We set off to-night at seven o'clock, well in health, and, physically speaking, in excellent condition; but the heart still suffers from our separation, though not from the sacrifice of itself which is still to come. The truth is, my dear friends, that I did not know that I loved you as much as I find I do. No; I was not aware of the strength of my affection, and I thank God that He did not let me fully know it beforehand. I should have shrunk perhaps

from the trial, and then have greatly repented of it afterwards. Now this suffering gives some price to the sacrifice, and does not certainly diminish its merit. I bless God for it all.

"I hope that you went to the 'Te Deum' at St. Mark's on the 31st of December. In the course of a year so many blessings and graces have been received, and even if we do not quite see this, we have at any rate to thank God for the innumerable miseries we have been spared. In any case, it is always essential to end the year in that way. Here I have every day received for you the blessing of Benediction, and offered up also for you my Communions. Oh! I wish you so much to be happy.

"My dear Tonnino promised me that he would call on the patriarch. It would give so much pleasure if he would do so. Tell him, my dear friend, that I recommend myself to his prayers, and that on my side I will always pray for him, for his clergy, and for his flock. I do love my dear Venice so much! I feel as if I had never loved it so much before; I think of it incessantly, and always feel prompted to pray for all its needs. Tell the good patriarch also that I kiss his hand, and that I beg him to give me his paternal blessing.

"Farewell, my beloved ones—my heart embraces you both most tenderly. Love me, and may God bless you.

"NATALIE."

CHAPTER XI.

1848.



NATALIE'S journey from Venice to Paris seems like a crossing from one shore to another, during which she felt the last motions of the waves of the world.

We cannot but admire, in these simple, sincere, and touching letters, the humble care with which she keeps in the background the supernatural and heroic side of the line she is taking, and only speaks of her love, her regrets, and her tender anxiety for all that relates to her sister. We see in this that spirit of charity which was about to rule her entirely, and which alone has the power of destroying the least element of selfishness. But in spite of all the natural affection she evinces up to the last moment, we do not find the least trace in her of even an instant's resistance to grace. The nearer she approaches to the end, the more we can discern that everything appears easier to her soul, and that a great and deep joy succeeds this hard trial, and crowns her struggles.

When she arrived in Paris on the 8th of January, 1848, she did not know how long she would have to wait for her brother's final consent, and had still some fears that he would endeavor to prolong the period of her probation. M. Narischkin's honesty of purpose and true affection for his sister, led him to have only one solicitude on the subject, and that was the solid nature of her reasons for taking so important a step. He had several conversations on that point with M. Aladel, and felt, in consequence, so much confidence and respect for the holy missionary, that he ceased to offer any opposition to the real-

ization of his sister's wishes, and she was able to seek—without restraint—the advice which seemed to her necessary and useful, and to fix exactly in the way she wished the day and hour of their separation.

It may seem strange that M. Aladel's advice did not suffice to determine her as to her vocation, but in spite of a deep and increasing veneration for him, she felt it necessary to consult those whom she called her first fathers; and at Paris, as at Venice, it was to the wisdom and experience of the Jesuit fathers that she had recourse.

Some of our readers are perhaps not aware that St. Vincent of Paul established it, as a rule, that the Sisters of Charity should not choose as their confessors the priests of the Society of Jesus. His object was to maintain amongst them a rigorous simplicity of thought, language, and manners becoming obscure servants of the poor, but not consonant with the vocation of the illustrious society devoted to the work of education, and to an Apostolate in the midst of the world. The direction of the Sisters of Charity was assigned to the Lazarist Missionaries, who had been founded with an analogous object and in the same spirit, and in case they had not any of these religious in their vicinity, the holy founder desired them to go to confession to the priests of their parish.

We can easily fancy how people possessed with a rabid spirit of injustice towards the Jesuits—a spirit which sometimes obscures the judgment of otherwise sensible persons—might smile at the bare idea that a gifted and high-born lady, who consulted them as to the choice of her vocation, would be advised to fix upon the order most withdrawn from their own influence. This was, however, the case with Natalie and many others. It was the sons of St. Ignatius who led her to the feet of St.

Vincent of Paul; and in the absence of Father de Ravignan, who was then at Rome, Father Lefèvre decided her final choice of the Order which Father Ferrari and Father Curci, at Venice, had recommended her to enter, and to which she now irrevocably devoted herself for the rest of her life.

Natalie was twenty-eight when she came to this momentous decision. Even those who are not called to the religious life, and who feel themselves incapable and unworthy of so high a privilege, can appreciate the wonderful blessing of such a vocation. They can understand how it throws open the way, so to speak, to a nearer approach to God, and that if it deprives the soul of some of the joys of this world, it delivers it from those sufferings which those joys entail, and especially of those which touch the heart. For, after all, are we not always obliged to control our feelings? and does not life often, and death inevitably, dis sever the closest ties?

Oh! we may well envy those who, of their own accord, break these chains. Do not let us be so foolish as to pity them, but on the contrary, learn and understand the great lessons they teach us.

It was on the 21st of January, 1848, that Natalie left, forever, her brother's house. She went that day to the Hospital de la Rochefoucauld, at Montrouge, where she was to make a first trial of the life to which she aspired, and thus prepare, by a short postulancy of two months, for her novitiate.

At the moment that Natalie Narischkin was thus leaving the world, Alexandrine de la Ferronnays, worn out by her toils in the cause of charity, was about to die. At that time—so solemn a one for both of these devoted souls—they met again, and the new servant of the poor, wearing her habit, knelt by the bedside of her dying friend. This meeting—almost as affecting as that of

Natalie and Olga at Brussels, in 1843—was brightened by the light that played on both their opening paths. The words they spoke were full of hope and joy. Before going to meet Olga in heaven, Alexandrine's eyes had seen, in her last hours, the complete answer to the prayer which had been on her young sister's lips as she quitted this world. Two days afterwards she died, and entered on that blissful eternity of which she had enjoyed a foretaste on earth, after making a full surrender of every earthly happiness.

On the day after her death, Natalie came to kneel by her side. This was on the 10th of February, the anniversary of the one on which five years before, at Brussels, she had seen Olga lying on her death-bed, and prayed during these long hours, the memory of which she ever retained!

That eventful date, which thus twice had marked in Natalie's life epochs of special trial and prayer, was destined to be the epoch of another sad bereavement. Whilst Alexandrine was expiring under her eyes, her sister Marie (Madame de Valois) was dying, at a distance, of an illness which had long threatened her life. In the first days of her separation from her family, Natalie underwent the most trying consequence of her vocation,—the absence from her beloved relatives at a time when her tender care would have been so much valued. But though still called upon to suffer—and it is not in order to escape suffering that a soul devotes itself to Jesus Christ—she was delivered from all the agitations arising from impatience, discontent, and resistance to God. Though only just entering on the path to perfection which she was to follow to the end, her heart had found peace even on the threshold of that holy abode where she had sought God and the poor.

Her letters from Montrouge bear the blessed impress of that Divine peace, at the same time that they express

her unalterable affection for those dear ones whom, for God's sake, she had left, and whom He permitted her to love as fondly as ever. It was during her residence at Montrouge that happened the great events which convulsed France and Europe, in February, 1848. She seems scarcely to have been conscious of these public agitations. If she alludes to them it is with the feeling of one who, sheltered in a safe haven, hears the storm raging at a distance. In the preceding pages we have a little anticipated the course of events to which the following letters refer:

“MONTROUGE, HOSPICE DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD,
29th of January, 1848.

“MY DEAR FRIENDS,

“I have been now a week in this place, where it is God's will I should serve Him, in the person of His poor. Please do not grieve over me. I am not dead—oh, no! on the contrary, I am very happy. His Voice had been so long calling me that I feel as if I must have stopped my ears not to hear it. Such weak creatures as myself are of very little value, I assure you; but He evidently wants by degrees to detach me from everything, and to give my heart, once for all, where He, our only and real treasure, abides. . . .

“I am a postulant at the Hospice de la Rochefoucauld, near the barrière of Montrouge. It is at about twenty minutes' distance from the Mother-house, where I shall not go till I begin my novitiate, which will be about the middle of May. But before Alexander leaves Paris I shall have taken the habit of a novice. Now I wear a black gown, a white apron, a large rosary on the left side, and a little black cap. Four o'clock is the hour for rising, and nine for going to bed; but though I am in excellent health I am taken great care of, and not yet allowed to do like the others. I have a great many oc-

cupations, so you must expect fewer letters from me, as I have to divide amongst many the time I have for writing. You may tell A. Z. that she may indeed, if she likes, fancy me by the bedside of the good little old women whom we have to nurse, to dress, to feed, and to take care of; and very sweet it is to be thus employed, when we remember that it is God we thus serve, and for His sake that we do it. It is not difficult to keep this thought in mind, when from morning to night one is surrounded with such perfect examples of obedience and abnegation. There are really some of our sisters—I might perhaps say all, but I speak of those whom I see here every day—who surprise and edify me from morning to night. I think that the most ill-natured person, and the most anxious to discover faults in them, would not be able to detect in their lives anything contrary to virtue. What God requires of me will be in proportion to the examples He has set before me. Now, as you wish to know it, this is the employment of my happy day:

“Hitherto, I have got up at five. They have not allowed me yet to rise at four. We dress quickly, and go down first to the little chapel in the house, where we stay till a quarter past six, and then go to the refectory for breakfast. Afterwards we hear Mass, and afterwards I go to the wards of the good old women, where I am employed till eleven, at which hour we dine. Grace in the chapel, and some other spiritual duties, take up the time till half-past twelve. Afterwards we sit together and work till two in the community-room. When the clock strikes two spiritual reading begins, followed by the recitation of the rosary. At three I go and help a little in the linen-room, and then I go back to the old women, feeding them, and putting them to bed. A sister reads prayers morning and evening in the infirmary. It is a touching sight, and everything here gives one holy feelings; my only

fear is not to profit enough of these graces. At six o'clock we sup, from seven to eight we sit again in the community-room, then we go to the little chapel, and at nine o'clock everybody is in bed. On Sundays and Holy-days we have music at Mass and Benediction. Every Thursday, and also on all the first Fridays of the month, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Nothing is wanting to my happiness, beginning by the incomparable joy of living in the house of our Lord.

"Tell everybody that I cannot write much, but that in my heart there is room for all those I love, and that in my prayers none of them are forgotten. Tell Father Montellé too that I shall always remember him, and that I reckon on his prayers."

Some days afterwards she writes:

"You will have heard of the death of our saintly Alexandrine de la Ferronnays. I need not say that her death was like her life,—pure, holy, and edifying. She expressed in her last moments the most ardent desire to see God. The last words she said to me when she could hardly speak were, 'Happy girl.' Oh yes, happy!—a thousand and a thousand times happy—I can never weary of repeating it!"

In her dying hours, Alexandrine spoke to her friends of nothing but the happiness of leaving this world. The only one whom she seemed to think happy in remaining on earth was she who was forsaking all worldly joys for God alone.

The following letter is dated February 11th. She had just been praying by Alexandrine's death-bed, and had just heard of her own sister's decease:

"MY BELOVED ELISABETH,

"Though I wrote to you a long letter only a few days ago, my good Superior gives me leave to write again in

order to console you, and to beseech you in the name of that faith which leads you to say, 'God's will be done,' not to give way too much to grief, hard as is this trial. I ask it for the sake of your good husband, and also a little for my own sake, for I can think of nothing but your sorrowing heart. Thank God, dear Marie was quite resigned, and ready to make to Him the sacrifice of her happiness and her life. I was to the greatest degree comforted by all that A. Z. wrote to me on that subject. We may hope that she has found favor with God, and that she is now blessing us and praying for us. Enlarge your own heart, dearest, as much as possible, and tell God that you love Him; and out of love for that merciful Saviour who has given you such a happy lot, accept this sacrifice, and unite it and offer it up with the great Sacrifice made for us on Calvary. Then try to be calm and do nothing to keep up your grief. In your case it would be a great imprudence, but it is always displeasing to God. Courage, then, and peace and quietness!—once more I ask it in the name of all that I have already urged. As to the other subjects which make you anxious, trust me all will go on well. My postulancy has not produced any change. I can act just the same about all that concerns your interests, and you may be certain that I shall do everything necessary. Oh, dear Elisabeth, if I could only describe to you the happiness and the peace I feel every day more! God is too good to me! We must love Him, and try to get others to love Him too, and to know Him better. Seek Him, dearest, and you will soon feel the same.

"Yesterday, the 10th of February, was the anniversary of Olga's death, and I was praying by the side of our dear Alexandrine, who died on Wednesday between eight and nine o'clock. They were all there except poor Pauline, who is far away at this moment—a sad thing

for her and for all of them. The coincidence of their sorrow with ours made us mingle our tears, and pray for one another. Madame de la Ferronnays is so holy, and Albertine* is as pious and fervent as her mother. This is indeed necessary in order to arrive at that perfect detachment which unites our will entirely with God's will, and makes us love it above all things. This is not the work of a day; but do not be discouraged, by degrees it will come.

"I tenderly kiss you both. Ask Father Montellé from me to come and comfort you. Farewell, my beloved ones. I love you, and I bless you. Love me also, and be satisfied about me, for indeed I am happy.

"NATALIE."

Three weeks afterwards she wrote again to her sister:

"March 1st, 1848.

"MY POOR DEAR, BELOVED ELISABETH,

"I received your little letter yesterday, that sad but dear little letter which I had so impatiently expected. I thank God for what it contained. Our good Thérèse had already given me comforting news of you. She is indeed one of those who understands the griefs of others. She had guessed my feelings, and her affectionate and pitying heart hastened to soothe my affliction. I am deeply grateful to her. My thoughts cannot leave you for a moment, and I now doubly rejoice that Catherine will soon be with you. I like to feel that you will be in the same place.

"Here the most terrible events have brought about, in three days, the end of a reign and the fall of a dynasty, as well as that of the monarchy. Peace prevails, but under a Republic. If Alexander leaves Paris, I suppose

* Olga's youngest sister, now Vicomtesse de la Panouse

he will, in any case, meet A. Z., so I will give him the things I want to send you: your shawl, your black book—which I should not be allowed to keep—and some other little things I brought with me as a postulant. They are small matters, but the last I shall have to part with. If everything goes on quietly it is not impossible that Alexander may go to Venice. Oh, how I long to hear of the general pacification of Italy; and that Catherine is with you! When the first emotion of meeting again is over, you will begin a quiet, nice, regular life, like ours when I was with you. The little rooms will again be inhabited, and this new existence will seem the continuation of the one we led together for two years. With regard to myself, dear Elisabeth and dear Tonnino, do not think that the religious life can ever change my affection for you. I assure you that it is quite the contrary; for, as I was saying the other day to Catherine—in the silence of a quiet, retired life, and in the midst of continual work for the poor, or even more commonplace occupations, the heart expands in God's house. You see the happiness of being at every moment in His sacred presence, and close to the Tabernacle! My constant, my daily prayer is for you. I may even say—for it is the truth—that you have not only a share in all my prayers, but in my whole life; for in each one of my actions—if, for instance, I feel a little tired or a little lazy—I think of you; and as our good God accepts everything we offer to Him, I then hasten to make for you the little effort called for, and that immediately rouses me to exertion. Parting with you made a wound in my heart too deep to be ever closed. It does not bleed now, because I am happy to have gone through that and every other suffering for God's sake. It has ceased to be painful, but it can never be effaced. You need not, then, my dear Elisabeth, think I can ever forget you. Tell me of every-

thing you do, speak to me of all that interests you, be it sad or pleasant, be it pleasure or sorrow. Be quite certain that you will always find my heart ready to share, and as far as my power goes, to soothe, all your cares, and enter into all your feelings—if in no other way, by an increased fervor in my prayers for you. Give Catherine a most tender kiss from me when she arrives. Give me every little detail of those first moments, and how you have arranged for her my dear little room and my oratory. May you be happy, my beloved friends—may God bless you and bestow on you His highest graces. My best love to all our friends. I love them all.

“NATALIE.”

The following letter, dated March 16th, 1848, is addressed to a friend almost as dear as a sister, and to whom she could speak with still more freedom:

“You are quite right to complain of me, my very dear and good friend, for it is indeed a long time since I have written to you. But in order to forgive me, remember that as far back as seven weeks ago I consecrated to God, amongst other things, my *liberty*. Oh! it is so sweet to utter that word,—that word which makes one the happy slave of a Master whose yoke is happier and sweeter than the highest enjoyments of this world.

“You asked me, in one of your last letters, what had brought about the changes which have led me here. I think the first thing which made me think of it was the history of the sons of St. Ignatius. Their ‘*Ad majorem Dei gloriam*’ became from that moment my own motto, and I hope it will remain such to my dying breath. As to the choice of the means to that end, my definitive engagement under the banner of St. Vincent of Paul, it was fully approved by Father Lefèbre (Father de Ravignan was at Rome). His opinion confirmed entirely the advice I had

received at Venice; that of Father Minini, whom I made acquaintance with at Turin, and Father Peschard, whom I saw at Chambéry. As to my weakness and my sufferings at the terrible moment of separation, I will not dwell upon it; I felt as if I was breaking Elisabeth's heart, and my own yet more.

"But what do we know of the thousand ways God makes use of to promote the good of our souls and the glory of His name? She wrote to me afterwards letters which touched me deeply, and which showed how well she understood the wish to suffer for His sake who has suffered for us, and to make sacrifices for Him!—and she told me to pray that she might have the love which makes crosses easy and light, and even enables us to bear them with joy. And indeed she has borne the great sorrow which has fallen upon us since with more calmness and resignation than I could ever have ventured to expect. . . . Poor dear Elisabeth! After having granted her so much happiness, God is now making her ascend to Calvary. Catherine must be with her by this time. I long to hear of them together, for I assure you that if I have a single earthly care still at heart, it is for their happiness, and I should always want to be assured of it. As for you, I know where I can find you every day, and I do not forget it.

"Oh! how well it is to feel that heart and thoughts are there where our real treasure is, and that thus we never lose sight of each other! . . . Thank the good fathers for their messages, and tell them that my heart will never forget them before God. Indeed I feel a real consolation in thinking of each and all of them in that way. My own dear father, you know, loved and appreciated that holy Society 'which bears no earthly name,' and it never will be said that one of his daughters has been unfaithful to St. Ignatius.

"The community will attend to your commissions, and one of these days our good Superior at the hospital will send me to hear Mass and receive Holy Communion, for your intention, at Nôtre Dame des Victoires. But political events have interfered as yet with this little plan formed so long ago. You can understand that they did not like to let us walk in the streets without absolute necessity at such time as this; though hitherto religious communities have not suffered any risk. Oh, let us pray!—constantly pray—for that general peace which would bring back all hearts to the love of God. I shall try to write to you once more before the end of my postulancy, for when I shall have entered the seminary there will be an end of letters for the rest of the year. During that time we can write only to our relatives, and even to them not very often. This is a little sacrifice that our good God will accept if we know how to offer it up in the right way. Well, my dear, darling little Sache, I must leave you! Do not forget to thank God for me, and to pray for my sisters. You may rely on my associating you with all my actions, prayers, and sufferings, and all the good works of our community.

"It will be easy for you in a great measure to know what is our rule of life, as there are Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul at Naples, and all our houses follow the same rule with the most exact fidelity.

"Farewell; I affectionately embrace you. A thousand loves to Mita and the Serra-Capriolas. My respectful remembrances to your dear parents. Pray for your loving sister.

NATALIE."

To the same friend she wrote on the 22d of March, 1848:

"I hasten to tell you that your commission is done, and that the parcel will be sent to Marseilles to-morrow.


I have added to it a little picture of the altar where I prayed and went to Communion for you this morning. As our Superiors have kindly decided that I can be admitted into the seminary on the eve of the Annunciation, I write to bid you a little formal farewell, which means that my pen takes leave of you for a time, the novices not being allowed to write during a year except to their nearest relatives, and once to their confessor. So you will not now hear from me for a year. But be sure that my heart will never, never forget you. . . . Pray for me, as I shall pray for you; pray that God may give me grace truly to profit of that happy time which I look upon as a prelude to paradise. It is said by all those who have gone through it, that it is like entering a sanctuary from which all cares and all anxieties are banished. Everything exterior seems to be hushed and kept aloof. It is a time of grace and perfect earthly happiness, and often that of our whole eternity results from it. How important it must be then not to lose any particle of its graces.

"Oh, yes, my dear little sister, Marie's death was a great grief to me; but never more than at that moment, and during the days which preceded it, did I feel all the happiness of being here, where I could offer a great deal, and everything for her. Think also of my dear sisters at Venice; I do so incessantly; and let us pray also for all the needs of poor Europe. I kiss you most affectionately, and I remain closely united to you in the Heart of our adorable Lord and Master.

"Remember me most kindly and respectfully to your father and mother, and also to Father Latini and Father Curci, I leave it to you to explain to everybody that I cannot write at present to any one. A thousand loves to Mita Gargallo, and to the Serra-Capriolas, and tell them all that *I am happy.*"

CHAPTER XII.

1849.

“ AM happy!” How frequently had Natalie uttered these words since she had entered on her new life! We so seldom hear this exclamation in a world where happiness is nevertheless ardently and universally sighed for, and the faintest appearance of it hailed as a hope or a promise without which few would care to live, that that expression is worth attention. No doubt that the wicked, in the midst of their guilty pleasures, often give utterance to such a sentiment, and that in their moments of legitimate and innocent joy the good also feel and declare themselves happy. But even the purest and sweetest earthly bliss is so evanescent that it is hard to realize its existence before it vanishes; and when it has departed, life remains for some an anticipated hell; for others, a sad period of expectancy, only brightened by the rays of Divine hope. This is the fatal price which has too often to be paid for the temporary enjoyment of this world's happiness; and the more keen and exhilarating have been those short-lived joys, the more deep and bitter are the wounds they leave behind them when they disappear.

This is so evident that it amounts to a truism; and yet one cannot but revert to the thought, when those same words are uttered with a different and unearthly accent, which indicates that the happiness they express will be neither precarious nor transient—nay! that from its very nature it will go on increasing and enlarging, until the day when it will be merged in immortality, the

mere foretaste of which triumphed over the trials and vicissitudes of time.

Yes, I will never cease to repeat it ! I cannot understand that, at an epoch when the human mind is continually engaged in elaborating a thousand systems—the object of which is, after all, to afford happiness to the greatest possible number of persons—people close their eyes, shut their ears, and stifle their judgment, in order not to see those happy faces, not to hear those joyful voices, not to listen to those who would prove to them that what they are seeking others have found, and that the problem has been practically solved which they are vainly striving to fathom.

But we shall be asked, perhaps, if it is our wish to see the world emptied for the sake of filling the cloisters. This vain desire has indeed never entered our mind. But we look upon it as a general law, in accordance with the fate of humanity, to consider those souls whom God has called to an exceptional vocation, as beacon-lights set on a height to show us the way to true happiness. We shall not tread that path with the same swiftness, we shall not reach the summits they have reached, we shall not drink of the full cup of unearthly joy which is the portion of God's chosen ones on earth, but we may taste a drop of it perhaps, and attain to a higher insight into the promises He has made to us. Life will then no longer be shrouded in dark mystery. If we are amongst the happy few of this world, we shall learn to prize our joys at their right measure, and be prepared to resign what can only last a while; or, if we belong to that far more numerous crowd to whom blessings were once given, now forever passed away,—or to those, perhaps, yet more to be pitied, who have never known any happiness,—we may aspire to a yet more exquisite joy. Those who meekly accept the burthen God lays upon

them may share the blessed lot of those who have voluntarily assumed them.

"The world begins well," says an author I have already quoted,* "and ends badly. Nothing which has not the transforming touch of Divine grace can really please and hold the soul or the heart. On the other hand, God begins by what seems hard and stern, by commandments and rules, limitations on our liberty, and restraints upon our nature. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,' and He first of all trains us to holy discipline. But He raises us higher and higher; He gives us new tastes and perceptions; and when we come to be able to enjoy spiritual delights, they are like the good wine which was kept to the last. At first the Cross is hard to bear, the doctrine of humility is difficult, it is a pain to conquer and subdue ourselves; but when once these things find the palate of the soul capable of tasting their sweetness, there is no longer any room left for any sweetness but theirs. And if it is so in this life, if the yoke and burthen of our Lord even here are easy and light to those who take them up courageously, much more is the parable underlying the miracle of Cana true in the next world, which is the last thing which our merciful God has in store for us—the last and the best."

* * * * *

The day that Natalie crossed the threshold of the Hospital of Montrouge she gave herself up so completely to God that there was not any transition time, as it were, between her life in the world and in religion. Never for a moment was the hand which had been set to the plough, withdrawn; never was a glance cast backward. In the novitiate she acquired the habits of her new mode

* "Public Life of our Lord Jesus Christ," Father Coleridge, S.J., vol. I., chap. xii., page 171.

of existence, and learned the way to devote all the powers of her soul, mind, and body in a new direction ; but from the first moment, her humility, simplicity, and obedience, were what they ever afterwards remained; and in the meek servant of the poor nothing recalled the young girl who had spent her early years in the midst of the most brilliant cosmopolite society of Europe.

Once, however, she and others were involuntarily reminded of her former position, and that was when a broom was for the first time put into her hands: the awkwardness with which she handled it dismayed her. Her companions could not help smiling at the novice's clumsiness, but were still more struck with her gentle patience, her assiduous efforts to do better, the pleasure with which she received reproofs, and her perfect good temper and readiness to be instructed. One of them said, " There was a simple grace about her which won all hearts."

On the 24th of March, 1848, she left Montrouge, and began her novitiate in that house in the Rue de Bac she had so long known and loved. During that year of probation her correspondence was limited to a few letters to her sisters, the tone of which shows that she had not been deceived in her expectation that the novitiate would prove to her a foretaste of paradise. We find nothing changed in her tender love for her relatives, and her unaffected interest about them; but she seems to be writing from a world like to ours indeed as to prayer and labor, love and suffering—but full of that joy which arises from peace with God, with men, and with self.

This halt, as it were, of a year's duration, before the beginning of a life of incessant activity which does not leave unoccupied a single hour of the day, must have been very congenial to one who had so strong an attraction to meditation and silence. To live a while in this

retirement, in a place shut out from earth and widely open on the side of heaven, realized Natalie's dearest dreams; and they were probably the only days of her life during which she was able fully to indulge the feelings which filled her soul. But though long hours are given to silence and prayer during the novitiate, the future Sister of Charity has also to exercise herself in the various duties she will have hereafter to perform. Natalie's zeal, obedience, exact attention, and quick comprehension of her new occupations never failed, and her natural sweetness, intelligence, and charm of manner, assisted her in their practice. The thought that she was working for God never left her for a single moment, or that of preparing her soul—by watchfulness, mortification, and the habitual surrender of her own will—for the greater enjoyment of the moments she was in His immediate presence, and could satisfy her yearning desires of love and union with Him. One of her companions who has favored me with these details, says, with a simple depth of thought, "The greater is the heart the more needy it is, for nothing on earth can fill it. This is why our dear sister Natalie never shrank from any sacrifice, in the hope of ever gaining a greater nearness to God." To say the truth, these sacrifices were so generously made that it astonished her to find that others thought anything of them, especially as, at the same time she was edifying her superiors and her companions, she herself lamented over her continued inability to fulfil properly the duties she had to perform in the house and the kitchen.

One of her directresses, touched by her earnest efforts, gave her a private lesson in her room as to the manner of handling a broom, and also as to several other acquirements of that sort. Natalie took the greatest pains to profit by these instructions, but neither during her

novitiate, nor her subsequent residence at the Mother-house, did she quite succeed in mastering these difficulties. Later on, however, she overcame them all; and by the time she was herself placed at the head of a community, was able to turn her hand to the most minute details of domestic work, as well as merely to govern its general administration. But at the time we are speaking of, the humble novice was far from foreseeing that the office of Superioress would ever be assigned to her, or desiring it. Her delight was to obey, for it was the only way of satisfying that spirit of humility produced by the love of God.

As to wearing a habit which was the badge of her devotion to that love, and to that of the poor, it was her joy and her pride. How could she have felt it a humiliation to serve those of whom our Lord has said, "What you do unto them you do unto me." We do not find many details as to acts which had no value in her eyes but that of obedience—to her the dearest of all virtues—in the brief sketch by which the Community of the Sisters of Charity commemorates the merits of a deceased Sister for the sole benefit of her companions. Those who drew it up were not likely to see anything remarkable in facts which make up the whole of their own lives. What we call charity, self-devotion, and heroism, they look upon as the simple fulfilment of daily duties. This is one of the difficulties of our present work, and the reason why those who might be supposed to feel most interest in it afford but little assistance to a biographer. To speak of one Sister of Charity is to describe them all. To praise her is to praise all her companions, and they detest praise of every sort. It is of all things in this world, next to sin, what they most loathe.

Time went by quickly. The year was drawing to an

end, and to prove that we have not exaggerated Natalie's merits we may mention here that her companions called her "the flower of the seminary." But before we follow her in the new phase about to open in her life, it will be well to transcribe some letters she wrote during her novitiate. They were addressed to her two sisters, Elisabeth and Catherine, who were then together at Trieste, where the official duties of the Baron de Petz had fixed their residence. This change of abode, and family affairs connected with it, occupied Natalie in her retirement, for she never could remain indifferent to the welfare of her relatives:

"PARIS, May 16th, 1848.

"MY BELOVED SISTERS,

"I waited a little to write till I could give you tidings of our dear Alexander. At last—the day before yesterday—I had the happiness of hearing from him. His letter was dated April 10th. As I felt sure, his silence proceeded only from want of leisure to write. I concluded that he had gone straight to Moscow, and wrote immediately to uncle Alexis to tell him of your letters, and to beg him to forward them immediately to Alexander, wherever he may be. I hope and I pray that God may have inspired you to write, long ago, directly to Moscow, for these delays and losses of time are injurious to your interests, and make me a little anxious. Not that I have not a great confidence as to the future, for I have very particularly committed you to the care of Divine Providence, and recommended to God all my wishes for you, whenever I have the happiness to be in his presence. But still I look forward impatiently to a letter from Trieste, which will tell me that my prayers have been heard. I have had a line from Edward *—written

* Her brother-in-law, M. de Valois.

in great haste in the interval of his warlike avocations—in which he speaks of your silence, and laments it. Poor dear brother! He is so unhappy, and his affection for his dear Marie's relatives so touching, that he deserves to be a little spoilt. I answered his letter at once, but who knows if, in the midst of all these commotions, mine will have reached him! Oh, my dear sisters, what a sad world it is! What disorder and confusion everywhere! More than ever it seems to me easy, and even necessary, to rise above it, and to detach ourselves from what is not really worthy of our cares. I feel ashamed when I think of so many years past and misspent, and I find consolation in the hope that God's infinite goodness will make that shame profitable to my soul and to His glory. Oh! do let us, my very dear ones, detach ourselves more and more from this world. Let us be like pilgrims, who care for absolutely nothing but the road they follow, and the end to which it leads!

“We have had a most beautiful month of May! How my dear Kate would have enjoyed it!—and then, quite a shower of consoling graces. For instance, the other day, the Sister Infirmarian, in trying to lift a patient from her bed, staggered and fell. The sick Sister, falling also upon her, dislocated the neck of the Infirmarian so badly that the passage of the throat was almost obstructed. The surgeons tried some remedies which proved quite useless, and then declared there was no hope but in an operation which might prove very dangerous. For six days she remained in a state of indescribable suffering; her leg and arm became paralyzed; and during all that time she could neither sleep, nor swallow anything but a few drops of liquid, and that with intense pain. Well, on Sunday the 7th of May, the Novena of the Translation of St. Vincent's relics began at St. Lazare; the sufferer joined in it with all her companions, and applied

to her neck a bit of St. Vincent's habit. Her faith increased, and also her pains. On the Thursday she entreated to be carried to the Shrine, and difficult as it was to do this, it was thought right to comply with her request. From that moment she felt certain of her cure. On the Tuesday, with a great deal of trouble, she was placed on a stretcher, and at four o'clock in the morning carried to St. Lazare. A Mass was said, and as it was going on she felt strange sensations in her bones. Her arm and leg recovered the power of motion; her head its position; and then after receiving Holy Communion, she felt so well that, without any assistance, she left the stretcher, knelt down with perfect ease, and walked home. Since that moment she has been in better health than ever. You may imagine, my dear ones, the effect produced amongst us by this miraculous event—the joy, the gratitude, the deep feeling it produced! We could not help seeing in it a fresh proof of the special goodness of our Lord to this dear house.

“As I cannot write to my friends, will one of you, dear sisters, communicate this fact to Marie de Bombelles, Mrs. Neville, and Thérèse (de Thurn). I know all the interest and the pleasure they will feel in it, and Miana also; and to think that, notwithstanding all my wretchedness and unworthiness, I am in the midst of all this—I know they will thank God for it.

“I want, too, my dear Marie de Bombelles to know that, on the day before I entered the novitiate, I wrote her a long letter, in which I enclosed one to Father Ferrari. Probably in the midst of all the agitations of that moment in Italy, these letters were lost. Tell her how affectionately I kiss her, and that I always pray for her and all of them. I am so glad to think of Catherine being with you, especially since you have told me the happiness it is to you. Still, my dear friends, your last

letters made me sad. I should so like to know all your affairs arranged. Try soon to write to me something pleasant about that. I think often of the Grand Duchess Olga, since Edward wrote to me that she interests herself about you. And then, as to other consolations, they all come from God.

“Farewell, with many tender kisses.

“Your affectionate sister, NATALIE.”

“PARIS, November 19th, 1848.

“Dear darling sisters, my good little Elisabeth,—what have you thought of my silence, which has lasted some days longer than usual, and that when you had so prettily asked me to wish you joy? Oh, yes, you may be sure that from my heart I wish you joy, and rejoice in your happiness with all the depth and extent of my affection for you. But I thought it would be better to make this sacrifice, and even to let you long a little for my letter, than to ask for a dispensation from the rule, which would have been, no doubt, charitably granted to me. I therefore refrained from doing so. To-day when there is no impediment, I cannot but feel that the pleasure it gives me to write to you is twice as great. Dear little sister—or rather my dear sisters—and you also, my dear Tonnino, whom you know well I never separate from you in my heart,—so you are all again full of joy and hope. Keep up, dearest Elisabeth, that happy trust you now feel, and which will always support you through all the trials of life. Do not let the thought of A—— make you anxious. It is not with you as it was with her,—the case of a first child. Be full of confidence in the protection of the Blessed Virgin during that beautiful month of May consecrated to her, and that seems to promise you a happiness for which I promise you to pray and to get prayers.

“Good Sister Barba has been so busy that she never could find time to write to you. She will make amends for this omission; and in the mean time both she and our good Father Aladel, who wishes you every happiness, are earnestly praying for your intention. Oh, my dear ones, I am so happy in God’s house! Nothing can equal this happiness, which literally increases every day. Thank and bless our Lord for me. I have so little myself to give Him—this wretched heart of mine—nothing else. Well, if only it can be occupied throughout eternity in praising Him, I ask nothing more.

“Bénédicte de Maistre is married, and lives at Bergamo; but her husband was very ill at the time that Count Rodolph de Maistre paid me a visit, and he was very anxious about him. All that charming little society of the governor’s palace at Nice is now dispersed. They have left that brilliant post, and are living in retirement near Turin. The Count had brought to Paris one of his sons, who means, I think, to become a son of the great Ignatius. How many events, how many changes everywhere! Nothing on earth will ever be lasting—nothing but what religion holds out and gives. Happy those who find in it guidance and help. Take great care of yourself, dear little Elisabeth, and try always—you and Kate—to love God and the Blessed Virgin more and more. Oh, you will also be happy one day!—I feel sure of it. Farewell; God bless you all.

“Your affectionate Sister,

“NATALIE.”

CHAPTER XIII.

1849



It was on the 13th of January, 1849, that Natalie was clothed in the habit of the Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul. This great and important moment of her life had been hastened in her case, and the time of her probation shortened by two months, in consequence of the great proofs of virtue she had given during her novitiate. We cannot know exactly, but we are inclined to think that if a choice had then been allowed to one who wanted only to obey, the new daughter of St. Vincent of Paul would have liked to be employed in the works most specially belonging to the Order she had entered. But instead of that, and though they had ascertained that her courage and devotedness would have been equal to all the duties, the sights and the perils which Sisters of Charity must accept and brave, her Superiors took the unexpected resolution of setting her to a quite different sort of work. All Natalie's companions possessed, like her, the above-mentioned qualities, but she was endowed with gifts not easily to be met with.

Her facility in letter-writing can be judged of by the specimens we have given of her correspondence. She spoke and wrote French like a native of France, and had not forgotten the language of her own country. English, German, and Italian she also spoke and wrote with fluency, and had a clear, neat, and pleasing manner of expressing her thoughts. The post now assigned to her was that of Secretary, at the central house of the Rue de

Bac, at Paris, and her work, a constant correspondence with the houses of the Order in every part of the world.

Thus she remained, for many years after her novitiate, in that dearly-loved house, engaged in important and interesting avocations, which it would not have occurred to her beforehand to covet, but in the accomplishment of which she found so much happiness, that obedience seemed to have regulated her life during that time in the most perfect accordance with her tastes and her natural aptitude, as well as with her twofold spiritual attractions. On the one hand, she was not severed from the poor—they always enter into part of the life of a Sister of Charity; but on the other hand, the duties she had to perform allowed her to divide the greatest portion of her time between work, recollection, and prayer; and thus to satisfy that love of contemplation which equalled the ardor of her active charity. So intensely did she enjoy this phase of her religious life, that it was only when she was compelled to accept other employment that she knew the cost of the effort obedience exacts. But this was not to happen till long afterwards, and we find her writing letters to her dearest friends, which enable us to judge of her feelings during those first years of her religious life:

“PARIS, March 4th, 1849.

“It has arrived at last—that day on which I can write—my dearest, to tell you the great news. There has been a little delay in communicating it to you, but you will not be the less glad to hear of it. About two months ago I was clothed in our holy habit. Our Lord gave it to me, as a New Year's gift, on the Russian New Year's Day—the 13th of January; and how many other blessed gifts does not that one gift allow me to hope! When I think that on such a day, only five years ago, I was satisfied with the merest frivolities, and that now nothing can

assuage the thirst of that same heart of mine but Jesus Christ and His adorable cross! Oh yes, my little Sache, I am at the height of my wishes!—and although in the service of this dear Master every office is alike, and every place the same—whether in exile, or poverty, or repose, or activity—I do look upon it as a special blessing that I remain in this dear house, which is so holy a home, and where we feel as if God's graces were showered upon us.

“What can I say in answer to your letters, and about the joy they give me, but that you are always my dearly-loved little sister, whom I associate every day, and with all my heart, in the good works I am engaged in? Tell Teresina Massa,* that I thank her and her good brothers for their remembrance of me before God. I feel so much interested in all you tell me about them. Tell her also to ask those two good Fathers,† Gaetano and Luigi, to pray for Catherine and Elisabeth, who are acquainted with them. I think the Baronne de Massa must be very happy to see all her children called to so high a privilege; such graces cannot be sufficiently appreciated. Marie de Raigecourt also entered the Order of the Visitation a few days after I arrived at Paris last year. Poor Albertine de la Ferronnays is staying here now with her brother Charles. She is pious, courageous, and resigned,‡ but very sad as you may well fancy. Do, dear little friend, tell Monseigneur Mislin that I have leave to accept the precious relic he offers to send me, and that I shall be most grateful for that present. Would

* She and her brothers were those youthful friends of Natalie, who at Sorrento, in 1835, endeavored in their childlike way to convert her.

† Father René Massa died a martyr in China. Four of his brothers had also devoted themselves to the foreign missions.

‡ She had just lost her mother.

you also add to your letter that I was very much touched by his recollection of me at the sepulchre of our Lord, and that I look upon it as a special grace to have been associated with the fervent souls for whom he was praying there?

“Marie de Bombelles gives me some hopes that Providence may sooner or later bring us together again. But how can we reckon upon anything in this world? What is there certain except eternity?—the only thought on which we can securely repose. Oh, let us strive hard to ensure its being a happy one!

“What becomes of my poor M——? I often sigh when I think of her; but there is nothing we may not hope from that Divine blood, shed for us—that is my only faith, my only hope—for sinners, for the whole world, and myself. Thanks also for Miss McCarthy’s kind remembrances. I am much interested and pleased by all you tell me about her. If you can find out where Father Ferrari is, do manage to give him tidings of me, and commend me both to him and to Father Curci. I look upon them as my first Fathers, and I promised Father Ferrari never to forget that I am his daughter. I shall keep my promise! Oh! when will the happy time arrive when religion will triumph and reign in every heart?

“Well, my dear little friend, I am obliged to leave off. I leave you in the Immaculate Heart of our dear Mother. Pray to her for me. I will write a line to Sachinka de Serra-Capriola, but give my love to my other friends, and beg them to excuse me, as now I cannot possibly keep up a large correspondence. Many kind messages to the Marchesa Gargallo.

“Your affectionate Sister,

“NATALIE.”

TO THE SAME.

"PARIS, May 4th, 1849.

"One single line in haste, my dear little friend, to thank you for your kind letter and its contents. A souvenir from Gaeta,* and another that speaks of nothing but the purest love of God! How precious all this is! Do pray that that love may never diminish in my heart. If we persevere in this petition we may hope indeed that this holy fire will never go out. But that is not enough, —I want it never to diminish! Oh! it is too great a happiness to belong to a Master as good as Him I serve. To feel one's self a poor little worm in His sight, and yet to know one belongs to Him!—this is indeed happiness; that thought, whenever it occurs to one, seems to fill my heart with joy. You can never bless God enough for me! I was so glad to meet again the excellent Abbé Gerbet; and some days ago I had the happiness of being called to the parlor to see good Father Curci. I need not tell you, dear friend, that we talked about you, and then about our blessed, our Divine Lord. Those sort of conversations do one so much good. I should like to describe to you all the overflowing gratitude which fills my soul, but it is better, perhaps, silently to dwell on such thoughts; and then I am much pressed for time, and I have said enough to induce you to thank God for me.

"Pray much for my dear little Elisabeth, who by this time must, I suppose, be a mother."

Three months afterwards, she wrote to the same friend, at Naples:

"PARIS, August 3d, 1849.

"A tiny word only, to say that I have ventured to send you a little parcel for Trieste, and that I forward an-

* The Holy Father was there at that time.

other, by the hands of our good M. Spaccapietra, for the same place, hoping that you will be able to send it more directly than I could do here, through the Embassy. They are both for my dear Catherine. Thank God, the accounts from Trieste are good as to health, and as to the dear little Marie Valentine. Dear Tonnino's absence mixes indeed a little sorrow with Elisabeth's joy, but she bears it with tolerable resignation. She feels that having received so much she must also give something in return, and that there is no unmixed happiness in this world. Anyhow I do long for the end of this sad war, and I continually pray and offer up the precious and Divine Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for that intention. But the designs of Providence are as wise as they are impenetrable. We must adore them in silence, till it pleases God to send a ray of light on the whole surface of the political world.

"I send you to-day only a small simple picture, always begging you to pray for your little Sister of Charity. Oh! if you knew how much God asks from those to whom He gives much! But if you only knew, also, how sweet it is to give Him everything we can, at every hour, at every moment, without an instant's relaxation! Ask that I may have an unalterable fidelity and generosity; even in the smallest things I never forget you. If you should see our dear Sisters Vinsonneau and Messine on their way, one to the new foundation at Averse, the other to Giovinazzo, they will tell you more about me than I have time myself to do—if indeed they can throw away any of theirs for that purpose. My love to all my friends. I write to no one. My affectionate respects to your parents."

From this time forward her letters to her relatives and acquaintances become more rare; she could not find leisure for correspondence, even within the authorized

limits. Her heart was ever faithful to her friends, but the key-note, so to speak, of her spirit is more clearly marked as time advances.

In the beginning of 1850, she writes:

“One more word to-day, to thank you for your little letter, and to beg for the continuance of your fervent recollection of me at the feet of our Lord. The happiness He lets me enjoy in His service is such that I cannot even attempt to speak of it. When the remembrance of the past rises up before me, the weight of gratitude I feel is quite overwhelming.

“You understand me, my dear little sister, but you never will know what He alone can know, what He alone can discern, as to the nature of those feelings. Oh! for my part I may well exclaim, ‘Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I can ever forget what I owe to the Lord!’

“Our good Sister Gottofrey has asked me what she was to say to you from me. The messages I sent were but the repetition of what I write, and can never repeat often enough. She told me of all the good you and your parents are doing. You can fancy what a sweet response her words found in the heart of your little sister. We did not see much of each other—Sœur Gottofrey and I—because, what with the retreats, and then all the work and the business of our Ark, it is almost impossible to converse. But it did not signify, a few minutes were enough to make me love that dear Sister. This is soon done, when two persons have the happiness of being enrolled under the same standard. It seems as if there was a sacred watchword for minds and for hearts which unites everything in a common centre. It is then a happiness to meet. No sooner do we know than we love one another; we feel that we are all the children of the same father,

the spouses of the same crucified Lord, possessing the same hopes and aspiring to the same happiness, which is nothing but the sovereign good—Heaven our portion, and our inheritance for eternity.

“Farewell, in the expectation of the happy day which will unite us all. Excuse this scrawl, and do not forget that what I ask of you is thanksgiving,—never can you offer up too much of it for your unworthy little sister,

“NATALIE.”

“P.S. My respects to your good parents. Say a thousand things for me to Sachinka, to Hélène Suchtelen, and both their families. I cannot write to them now, my time is not my own—tell them so. A happy slavery, I assure you; my only regret is not to have known it sooner.”

These affectionate letters, so full of love of God and of her friends, were scribbled by Natalie during the few minutes of leisure snatched from the beloved occupations of her daily life. She had a right to say that her time was not her own, for she had made an offering of it, as well as of herself, in the most unrestricted manner. But besides all that satisfied and nourished her soul in her vocation, it must be admitted that she was employed at that moment in a most interesting and attractive occupation.

What are, after all, the questions which absorb in the world the minds of those who are not given up to mere frivolity, and who know how to fill up their lives with interests worthy of the name? Do they not all relate in some way or other to the national or international questions which concern the improvement of the human race, and the greatest possible diminution of the evils inherent to it? And amongst those evils, do they not principally reckon the sufferings, the misery, and the ignorance

which affect, everywhere, the majority of men? And if, to soften the first, to relieve the second, and to dissipate the third, is to perform what—in the language of Christians—are called works of mercy, does not the world call them, in its own phraseology, works of civilization? We may well ask, then, what is the exclusive work of the Sisters of Charity, but to relieve the sick, to help the poor, and to instruct the ignorant? Such are also the objects of the zealous and eminent persons above alluded to; but it must be admitted that, generally speaking, they speak and discuss, and compare and write, more than they act. And if some of them do set on foot, at home, some undertaking more or less successful, it is seldom that we see them leave their homes to carry the results of their experience to the furthest ends of the world; whereas the daily acts which the Sisters are constantly performing under our eyes they likewise accomplish in every part of the universe—that Divine charity which summons and sends them to the help of the poor, extends from one pole to the other, and from the furthest East to the remotest West. Their white cornette is a symbol of hope and consolation for the most destitute, the most suffering, the most miserable of men. Nor is their devotion an isolated one. What they do is not the result of zeal in a few heroic souls, such as are everywhere to be found—to the praise of humanity. They form one closely-united family, animated by the same spirit. In number and in discipline they also make up an army of women, of whom it can be said, that “No dangers fright them and no labors tire”—who willingly accept interminable banishments from their native land, and too often a speedy, sometimes a bloody death. Then as soon as the fatal effects of pestilential climates or the hands of cruel men have thinned their ranks, the Mother-house is appealed to—that house so justly called

an ark by Sister Natalie, for it seems indeed to float as a sacred refuge on the stormy sea of Parisian life—and then immediately a fresh supply are joyfully told off to supply the vacant places, and none complain but those left behind.

One day, in 1854, I happened to be present when a young Sister arrived from a house at some distance with a commission from her Superior to the Mother-General, who seemed delighted when she appeared, and said, "that instead of returning to the place she came from, she would have to start immediately for one of the ambulances in the Crimea, where cholera and fatigue had made great havoc amongst the Sisters." The young Sister's only answer was an inquiry whether as she had not brought her apron with her she could go and fetch it. "No, there would not be time for that," was the reply; "what she wanted would be given to her." No other explanation was necessary, and the young Sister quietly and simply departed for her distant and perilous post.

If we admire, and with reason, military discipline, is it not still more striking to witness voluntary self-devotion accomplishing acts of such manly courage? And shall we not endeavor to discover the principle which enables women, with their weak natures, to accomplish what a feeling of honor cannot always secure in men and soldiers without the additional safeguards afforded by the fear of public disgrace and of severe punishment?

Be that as it may: it may be easily conceived that to be mixed up with the sort of universal action, and to follow in all its details the works of this great kingdom of charity, must be a most absorbing and interesting occupation, and that it gives the soul and heart a higher sustenance than that which satisfies women of the world, even when they are not particularly frivolous.

Such was Natalie's life for ten successive years. All her remarkable intellectual gifts were thus devoted to the highest and most useful labor, and this labor was the occasion of her exercising faculties she had never, till then, been conscious of possessing. She acquired the strictest habits of order, a quickness of decision, and aptitude in the transaction of business, which as time went on quite astonished those who had been chiefly struck by her simplicity and humility. These virtues were always conspicuous in Sister Narischkin, even when living amongst those who were all humble and simple.

But the importance of this assiduous work, and the very interest of a correspondence which sometimes brought, on the same day, letters from Rome, Constantinople, China, Greece, England, Germany, the United States, would have been injurious to health, if its hours had not been regularly and judiciously distributed. Time was so arranged as to afford needful rest, and measured so as not to affect health; a useful variety was secured in the occupations of each day. For so fervent a soul the sweetest repose consisted in the hours spent in the chapel she had so much and so long loved, where she had so earnestly prayed in former days, and so ardently asked that Blessed One, whose holy presence had sanctified this sanctuary, to obtain for her graces which had now been realized beyond her hopes. What her soul reaped during those long hours of prayer, of meditation, and holy instructions, could not be ascertained in detail; but it was guessed at by those who beheld her ever-increasing serenity, and her constant efforts to accomplish, with the greatest possible perfection, every one of her actions. Sometimes, also, it could be discerned by the radiant and beaming expression of her countenance.

It was towards the end of the year of her novitiate

that I saw her again for the first time since our abrupt and sad parting in 1843. I was staying then, for a few days only, in Paris; and hastening to the house in the Rue de Bac, I asked to see her. I was told that an instruction was being given at that moment in the chapel, and that as soon as it was finished she would be informed of my wish to see her.

I accordingly waited, and waited a long time, occupied meanwhile with the reflections always suggested by that house in which poverty, simplicity, and austerity are accompanied by such a prevailing peacefulness. Looking at the walls, I read the inscriptions upon them, amongst others this one: "It is worth while to live without pleasure in order to die without regret;" and again—"A God to serve, a soul to save, a Heaven to win"—and many others besides. I thought of Natalie as I had left her; I could not picture her to myself as I was about to see her.

At last she came in and quietly advanced towards me. When she kissed me with all the affectionate warmth of other days; when under her cornette I beheld again that same countenance, that same smile, of which I had preserved so vivid a remembrance; I felt a great emotion and a great joy, and at the same time a sort of astonishment. Far from being changed in appearance, or looking less well than before, her usually pale face was flushed with the brightest color. This struck me so much that I could not help remarking it. "Oh! it will go off," she said; "I am not always so—the fact is," she added, "that I have been spending an hour by the fire." What she meant was, that she had been hearing about God, and spending some time in his presence!

The remembrance of these words, which seemed to escape from her heart, has many a time warmed my own.

CHAPTER XIV.

1850—1854.



ALTHOUGH happiness is undoubtedly one of the mysterious fruits of a life of sacrifice, it would be erroneous to suppose that to secure it is the object of those who embrace that life in its most perfect form. It is granted to them in super-addition to what they have sought in it, but vocation is in reality the voluntary acceptance of the cross—the spontaneous choice of the way which Jesus Christ has trod, and where He calls His dearest friends to follow Him. It is not, therefore, in the least our object to draw for our readers a fanciful picture of the religious life, full of natural gratifications as well as supernatural joys. Such a strange idea would be in opposition to the inviolable conditions of all that is great upon earth. Everything worthy of being esteemed undergoes more or less in this world the inevitable law of suffering, and it is in proportion to the efforts they have cost that we measure their value. How could it be otherwise with sanctity, the highest and most sublime of all states? The human heart, whatever is its destiny, suffers and enjoys with equal intensity. But suffering belongs to this world, whereas enjoyment will attain its perfection in the next.

It is not therefore happiness *instead* of suffering that so many fervent and generous hearts come to look for in the shade of the sanctuary. It is happiness *in* suffering. First, in that suffering which nature must always experience in trampling over itself, in order perfectly to imitate Christ; and then, in trials of a still higher kind, which they alone are acquainted with,—for it is only in

the path of perfection that they are found. It is not for us to speak to those chosen souls of what may be called their own Divine trials. We can only guess at their nature by what saints have written and expressed. But we can explain to others, that just as the sun when it rises in the sky reveals to sight a variety and an extent of prospects in the natural world which in the dim light of dawn had been indiscernible, so does the Divine light, as it grows more intense, exhibit to a soul heights and depths and wonderful developments of perfection which sometimes dazzle and overpower it. Longing to penetrate into these hitherto unknown regions, it would fain advance, scale those heights, and plunge into those abysses; and then the humility of such a soul gives utterance to strange accents, which we who witness its virtues can hardly understand, and can scarcely conceive to be sincere. It is not a judgment they form, as much as a comparison, between their own spiritual state, not as compared with that of other imperfect creatures more sinful than themselves, but with an ineffable image which reveals itself more and more to their mental vision. They do not count the steps by which they have drawn near to it, but only those they have to make in order to reach it; and this union of perception of desire and of conscious weakness produces a special suffering, sometimes more trying and difficult to endure than physical pain. Its last and highest degree consists in the feeling of being unworthy of the happiness so ardently sought, and in the fear of not answering to the love which holds out that bliss.

These are things, of course, not generally felt or understood. They are, no doubt, imparted according to the graces already received, or in store for particular souls; but they are real and true, and, after all, not strange, if we call to mind that, even as regards human affections, earthly

love is attended by sufferings unknown to those who have never loved. It is the same with the purest, the most ardent, the most sublime of all affections. The all but inspired writer of the "Imitation of Christ," in speaking of Divine love, tells us, "No one can live and love without suffering."

Natalie was not exempted from this crucifying and strengthening trial, and it is remarkable that she went through that ordeal precisely during that happy period when more than at any other time her mode of life in religion was most in accordance with her natural tastes. But never for a single moment were her serenity or courage affected by those inward trials. They only served to increase her humility and that perfect love which lives on pure faith, and in the midst of darkness patiently waits for the infallible return of light. In spite, however, of her courage, and the perfect manner in which she continued to accomplish all the acts of her exterior life, it became evident that her health was beginning to suffer, and for some time it was found necessary to relieve her from the exact observance of her rule. In accordance with medical advice she was sent back for a while to Montrougue. Food more adapted to the delicate state of her health was provided, and so much care taken of her that she was soon well enough to return to the Mother-house. But before she arrived there, the cholera had attacked that dear home of hers. In the course of a few days three hundred sisters were taken ill with that fearful malady, and fifty of them died.

All who witnessed the aspect of the house, and the conduct of the sisters under these afflicting circumstances, were astonished and edified. Those who were seized with the terrible disease had but one single thought, not that of escaping death, but only of not dying in vain. Without fear and without regret they of-

ferred up their lives, some of them for their dear absent friends, some for a Sister in Religion—many in behalf of the whole community. This ardor for self-sacrifice went so far that the Superiors were actually obliged to put a stop to it, and to remind those who held their own lives so cheap that they had given them to our Lord Jesus Christ for the service of the poor, and that they were instructed “not to ask to die, but to live in order to work.” This exhortation did not reach Natalie before she, too, in all the ardor of her zeal, had made that same offering, and it seemed as if it had been accepted. Coming out of the chapel one day, she was seized with such violent symptoms of the epidemic that her case was considered hopeless. Dear as all her children were to the excellent Superior, this daughter of hers was more than commonly precious. Natalie saw her look of consternation, and exclaimed, “Oh! don’t be afraid! I think our Lord has granted my prayer. . . . I asked Him to let me die instead of some other Sister more useful than myself to our dear community. God is very good! and I am so happy to die.”

One of the Sisters of the Mother-house, who never left her whilst she was ill, bears witness that a greater calm serenity and supernatural joy in the midst of such terrible pain had never been seen. Not one regret, not one earthly desire, crossed that soul which seemed already in heaven. She patiently awaited the coming of her Divine Spouse, in peaceful union with His good pleasure.

The venerable director, Father Aladel, who had been at once sent for, thought that the hour had indeed arrived for that angelic soul to take its flight to Heaven, but God preserved her for further labors. She recovered, and so completely was her health restored that she was soon able to resume her duties as Secretary, and to follow

in every respect the rule of her Order without intermission and without fatigue.

Her companions saw her again at work amongst them, and watched as before the details of her holy life. One of them writes: "To meet her in the passages, to hear her speak, to have one's self a few words of conversation with her, was a joy to each one of us all." And yet, with the wonderful charm of her sweetness and gentleness, and when she was only a simple Sister, she showed that firmness of character which made her, when the time came, govern so well.

One day that she was sent with a message from the Superior she found several young Sisters who were talking loud and laughing at a time when the rule prescribed silence. One of them said, that when Sister Natalie came into the room, she seemed like an angelic apparition, and that her subdued and religious expression of countenance was enough without the utterance of a word to make them feel ashamed of the irregularity of their behavior.

Natalie accepted with a smile the apologies of the Sister who relates this little incident, and said with that charitable simplicity which made her firmness so gentle, "O, dear sister, do not disturb yourself. I am sure some unforeseen circumstance amused you, and I know that it is then very difficult to help laughing." And as her companion was expressing her fears that she had given scandal, Natalie rejoined, "Oh no, I know you too well to be disedified. You have a heart disposed to sympathize with every one; I am sure that your merriment was an act of charity, not a proof of levity."

This young Sister, whose only defect was to be sometimes led by her affection for her companions and the pleasure of talking to them into slight infractions of the rule, never forgot Natalie's charitable observations. Her

tender respect for her increased in consequence. "I admired" (these were her words) "the way in which she always saw the best side of things, and the charity which made her turn to a good purpose all she witnessed and heard. . . . She knew better than anybody how to appreciate what was right, and when truth allowed of it to excuse what was wrong. Oh, dear sister Narischkin, what holy recollections, what sweet and blessed reminiscences you have left in our hearts!"

Natalie's rapid spiritual progress, her detachment from everything earthly, and total forgetfulness of self, did not make her less simple, less affectionate, less kind in her intercourse with her relatives and friends. Her nature was transfigured, if we may so speak, but in no ways changed. The following letters will add a few touches to the description we have given of her life at that time, and relate to the occurrences of those two years:

"April 14th, 1852.

"If everybody understood the secret of happiness contained in the acquiescence of the will, I am sure we should oftener meet with persons like that good Jesuit Father at Venice whom we had nicknamed the 'Father without crosses,' because he would never let it be said that God sent him any. 'What is a cross?' he used to say, making one with his fingers. 'Well, it is easy to undo it,' he would add, hastening to change their position. I have never forgotten this simple little illustration, which shows so clearly what we have to practise. For my part, my crosses are made only of straw, but even those will not be useless for eternity if they are borne in a right spirit."

TO THE VICOMTESSE DES CARS.

"April 19th, 1854.

"I cannot attempt to express how much I have felt and shared your grief.* All the details you give me as to the death of your dear father have affected me very much. How happy are those souls, dear friend, who leave this earth after securing heaven by their resignation! Their departure makes us think more of our own, and the thought of their bliss re-awakens all our holy desires. Let these short separations detach us more and more from earth, and bring us nearer to heaven. These feelings are so familiar to you that I am not afraid of speaking to you in this sense. . . . My poor Kate† has been on the rack. It will be a happiness to her if she can be near you. Alas! I often say to myself—'Oh, why am I so happy in this world, whilst those who are so dear to me go through so many successive afflictions?' This thought would break my heart if I gave way to it; I must leave everything to Him who sends trials, which are really favors and graces."

TO CATHERINE.

"June 1st.

"My letters were sent on the 30th, just before I received from Geneva the telegram containing the heart-rending news‡ so sad to both of us. Oh, poor Alexander! If the thought of God's boundless mercies did not fill me with hope, I do not know how I should find strength to bear such a blow—. . . . and yet I am His; I adore His will, and love it above all things. But even one anxious

* Count Lebzeltern, father of the Vicomtesse Des Cars, had just died at Naples.

† Catherine Narischkin had at last resolved to become a Catholic.

‡ The death of her brother.

thought about a soul, and especially so dearly loved a soul, has in it such poignant bitterness, that if I did not throw myself into the arms of God with entire abandonment, I could not endure it. Oh! my dear friends, for God's sake, who is so good, but likewise so just, think well on that one important subject—eternal salvation! . . . I have been treated on this occasion with the most tender compassion. My sisters are all wonderfully good to me. I have written to my good uncle Alexis, that as I was the first person of the family who had received notice of this event, I thought it a duty to communicate it to him.

“More than ever, my dear friends, I give you all to our Lord, that He may bind you all to Himself, and be your all in all in this world.”

TO CATHERINE.

“August 9th, 1854.

“MY DEAR GOOD SISTER,

“I am so glad to hear that you mean to make a pilgrimage with N—— before coming here. That idea rejoices me very much. Do it with a strong spirit of faith, dear Kate, and you will feel the benefit of it.

“The Des Cars are at last arrived. Sache was to write to you before going into the country, and I hope she will return to Paris at the time you will be here. Her visit was a great pleasure to me. She is so pious, so sensible, so edifying, and so very charitable!—and she understands the poor so well. Our Sisters at Naples had already told me all that she does for them, but I have had the happiness now of judging of it for myself.

“I was anxious to hear of you after all the earthquakes that have taken place on the whole line of the Pyrenees.* Divine chastisements are afflicting on every

* Her sister was then at Bagnères de Luchon.

side our poor France. Here, like almost everywhere else, the cholera is raging.* You would be astonished to see our Sisters rush to the assistance of the victims. Every day they are sent for, to go to villages almost abandoned, without help of any sort. Alas! my turn has not come; I suppose that Almighty God does not think me worthy of so great a favor; and yet I assure you that I would gladly give up even your visit in order to be sent to the sick. If you hear that this favor has been granted to me, thank our good God, my dear sister. What a joy it would be to die in that way, like a soldier on the field of battle!—for our warfare is the exercise of charity, and our battle-field the cottages of the poor.

“Dear Kate, I understand so well all you feel, and on that account I long for you to be in possession of the graces and helps you are in need of. Our good God assists us under such circumstances. I experienced it at Moscow, when in the midst of our relatives I had to keep my secret for eight months. I should like to send you the narrative of the conversion of Father Jean Marie Augustin Hermann, a discalced Carmelite. It is impossible to read anything more interesting. I have seen him in our chapel, where he said Mass; and hymns were sung to the Blessed Sacrament, the music of which he has composed. They are most beautiful. He was a Jew, and the intimate friend of Liszt,—his life as worldly as could be. He used to laugh at everything religious, and now, by the sudden virtue and power of the Divine Eucharist, he has been in a moment transformed into a Saint—a St. John of the Cross! Alexander read the

* There is no allusion in her letters to the first invasion of the cholera, during which she was herself seized with the disease.

account of that conversion, and it edified him very much. Alas! when I remember that I had him here last year, that he came to our procession of Corpus Christi, and that I cannot look forward now to the blessed effects of those days of grace, my heart sinks within me; and, like you, dear Kate, I would give everything, and my life itself, if God would accept it, to recall him to life! But the vanity of this wish must only lead us to renew our sacrifice with the submission which God, who has required it, expects from us.

"I have just received a little line from Elisabeth, who is impatiently looking forward to your arrival. Poor dear sister, her happiness when Tonnino can be with her is dearly bought by the grief of his long absences. But she has so much faith, and is so grateful for the blessings God grants to her, that I feel hopeful as to her future. I assure you that I cannot keep her out of my thoughts. Oh, with what joy I shall welcome all the details you will give me about her! Come soon, dear sister!"

TO A FRIEND.

"I have long delayed thanking you for the double offering you sent me before your departure. The sum destined for the foreign missions will serve for the purchase of a chalice for the chapel of the new establishment at Damascus, which occupies us at this moment. I think the Sisters will start next month.

"I have sent a copy of the 'Life of Father Hermann' to Kate. As I happen to have another I will send it to you. I am sure that you will read it with interest. One feels inclined to exclaim with that chosen soul, 'Let us love Jesus, all the rest is nothing.' Yes, dear Sache, let us love Him, and may He ever be our all in all in this world."

“ December 11th, 1854.

“The news from the East continues to bring us terrible details about our poor soldiers. With what veneration we ought to look on the military profession, when we think of the self-devotion of those who belong to it, and the sufferings they endure with such wonderful resignation, esteeming it a simple duty to accept death!

“The number who are sent to Constantinople invalided is daily increasing, and the sick and wounded arrive there in a state which it is heart-breaking to witness. Everything possible is done to alleviate their sufferings. Our good God inspires some compassionate souls with a charity which invents all sorts of methods of relief. It is to be hoped that the actual cessation of hostilities may last beyond the spring. What terrible bloodshed there has been under the walls of Sebastopol! I will tell you many details about it too long to write.

“The services yesterday in all the churches of Paris were wonderfully solemn. The glorious privilege of our Mother was openly and joyfully proclaimed.”

TO HER SISTER,

“MY DEAR KATE,

“I cannot account for your silence, which grieves me very much, and I write to entreat you to let me hear from you. I don't know where and with whom you are; wherever you are, you certainly cannot be alone—there must be somebody who can tell me what you are doing.

“To-day is the Feast of your glorious patron Saint—St. Catherine. This makes me think of you still more than usual, and long to know how you are spending it. I must tell you, dear sister, and that with the hope of giving you scruples, that this silence of yours is the cause of many distractions in my prayers and spiritual duties;

and though I do not wish you to bear the punishment, I should like to make you feel a little repentance. . . .

"How is my little Valentine? Was she very glad to see her aunt, with her hands full of presents? I form to myself many a picture of happy moments since your return to that family home, if indeed you are there, dear Kate; for where are you?—there is the question. I hear that Bébé Strozzi will soon be here. Please God, he will tell me something about you."

"P.S. Our Sister Marchand has been in Paris, and spoke to me of your visit. She said you had been so good and charming that they were all full of it. I hope this is always the case, and that you are so to all those around you."

TO HER FRIEND.

"I have just received your letter, dear little friend, and at the same time a bottle of the water of Jordan sealed, and therefore genuine. My first thought was that it had arrived just in time for the baptism of the baby you are expecting, and I am sending it to the Rue de Grenelle, to be forwarded to you. We have in similar circumstances made presents of this water, which we often receive, and with the sanction of the Bishops it has been used, mixed with that of the baptismal fonts.

"If I am not mistaken, little Valentine Petz was baptized with water from the Jordan, which her father had brought back with him from his travels. For my part, I like to attach to it a peculiar virtue.

"I need not say that we shall pray for the new member of the family, and that he may be, one day, a saint in heaven, after having given his parents all possible joy and happiness on earth."

It may be thought that I multiply too much these extracts, and that these letters are not particularly inter-

esting. For my part, I cannot help admiring the wonderful simplicity of the writer, and the total absence of all assumption of superiority over those she addresses—calling to mind how high and perfect were her virtues, and the way in which people often give severe lectures to those a little less good than themselves, in their own opinion at least. And I cannot also but appreciate that entire forgetfulness of self which always prevented her from setting herself up as an example. I like to watch her never-changing interest in her friends, at whatever distance they might be from her or however inferior in moral qualifications,—an inferiority which she alone never seemed to be conscious of.

Amongst these friends we shall often find the name of one of her relatives for whom she always had a touching and peculiar affection, and who enjoyed in the world the sort of popularity which wealth and rank secure. He seems, however, to have deserved something better than this vain and empty praise, for he appreciated and venerated his holy niece, and nothing can be more honorable to his memory than the affectionate and pious solicitude which that angelic soul felt for him to the end of his life.

Writing on the 12th of August, 1852, she says: "I have received two charming letters from Anatole Demidoff. Since I have been a Sister of St. Vincent of Paul he has sent me a beautiful rosary, and a good little sum for the poor. I cannot foresee God's designs *on* his soul, but I pray and hope much for him. I sent him a small simple image of the Blessed Virgin, which he at once accepted, and he wears it round his neck. Is not this enough to fill with gratitude a heart even more wicked than mine?"

M. Demidoff's veneration and affection for his niece never underwent a change. Whenever he came to Paris he always visited her, and gave into her hands ample

alms for the poor. He had even told her to apply to him for money at all times and on all occasions. She did not trespass on his generosity, but had recourse to it sometimes with a gratitude which can be understood by those who know what an anguish it is to witness intense and pressing wants without the means of relieving them.

Natalie and the poor ! M. Demidoff could not have secured for himself better friends in God's sight ! They certainly never omitted to fulfil the obligations which his charity laid upon them, and acquitted their debts of gratitude by fervent prayers for him whilst he lived, and yet more earnest pleadings after his death.

CHAPTER XV.

1855—1858.



AT the beginning of 1855, Natalie had the unexpected joy of hearing that her dear and excellent friend, Marie de Bombelles, was soon coming to France. She had been residing chiefly with her father in Vienna since they had parted, and it may be easily imagined with what interest and sympathy she had watched, at a distance, the steps of the friend who was walking in the way she herself longed to tread, but in which she hardly hoped to follow her. Her health had become worse and worse, and she was so weak at that time that the least exertion was an effort, and the slightest fatigue seemed likely to kill her. It seemed almost dangerous to let her travel; but her father, whose idol and whose only comfort she was, ardently wished to leave his adopted country and to see France once more.

Feeble as she was in body, Marie had a strong character, a courageous and devoted heart, to which nothing seemed impossible. She loved nothing on earth as much as her father, and determined, at all costs, to gratify his desire. She herself entreated him to leave Vienna, and declared that she could perfectly travel with him, and had quite strength enough for the journey. Great anxieties were felt about her, and even alarm, when she started. In consequence of her feebleness it was necessary to travel so slowly that the journey to Versailles lasted a whole fortnight. But at last they arrived at that place; and there Count Charles de Bombelles fixed his residence.

It was some time before Marie recovered from the fatigue of travelling; and though so near to Natalie, had to wait a long time before she could see her. But at last they met, and we can fancy how joyful was that meeting and how sweet the converse between those friends. Marie remained, however, in the same state, and as time went on it seemed less and less likely that her health would improve. Her journeys to Paris from Versailles were generally preceded and followed by days and even weeks of exhaustion, during which she could not leave her bed. But weak and exhausted as she was, and for the most part hardly able to take food or leave her bed, she was continually occupied with her father, and devoted to him what seemed to be the last days of her existence. All at once, the Count de Bombelles was himself taken ill; his state soon became alarming, and then hopeless. From the first day of his illness, Marie rose from her bed, and sat by her father's couch day and night. Nothing could ever persuade her to leave him, and having nursed, consoled, strengthened, and supported him to the last, she saw him die in her arms.

Those who witnessed this heroic self-devotion expected to see her die also. Every one thought that her task of love once ended she would soon leave this world. But this was not to be the case,—not, at least, as they understood it. Instead of taking to her bed again, she remained better than she had been for years, ate without difficulty the food placed before her, and in fact had recovered her health so completely that no traces of her former ailments remained, or ever re-appeared. Having regained her health at the very moment when her father's death left her quite free to act as she pleased, it will not appear strange that she considered these circumstances an indication that the will of Providence was in accordance with the wishes she had felt ever since her child-

hood, and which in the shape of a desire, or a regret, had haunted her ever since. Nothing now opposed the realization of that wish. Her decision was soon made; and our readers will perhaps suppose that the two friends so closely united in feelings were about to have the joy not only of serving God in the same manner, but of serving Him in the same place. But this is not often the case with those who are specially called to follow the path which Marie, as well as Natalie, was now to tread. It was in the order of St. Francis de Sales, not that of St. Vincent de Paul, that she was to assume the religious habit; and, moreover, by Père de Pontlevoy's advice, she chose as her convent home—not one of those in Paris, where she might have had a chance of sometimes seeing her friend—but one at Vienna, where her energy and zeal would find scope amongst persons she knew and could influence, and for the good of her own soul and those of others more usefully labor.

A few days before her departure from Paris, on the Feast of St. Vincent of Paul, she had a last long interview with Natalie. The two friends walked together under the beautiful trees in the garden of the Mother-house, and Marie carried away with her a never-forgotten remembrance of that conversation. No wonder that it remained impressed upon her mind and heart, for the sweetest human sympathy, much as we value it, is but a faint image of the union between souls who value each other in Christ.

Though Marie was cured, as we have said, and completely so, as the future evinced, she was still weak at the time we are speaking of, and hardly able to go through such deep and tender emotions so soon after her sufferings and agitating trials. As she returned to the house with Natalie a feeling of faintness came over her, and she had to lean against the wall in order to re-

cover her breath. Some one who happened to be there, and saw her looking so pale and exhausted, could not help expressing surprise at the decision she had made, and asked her, "if she could not try to do good without being a nun?" "No, no!" Natalie exclaimed, "my little Sister must have the happiness of belonging entirely to our Lord."

Those words, and the way in which they were uttered, confirmed the resolution already formed by her friend, and seemed to her like a pledge that she would be able to accomplish it.

Then came the hour of separation—a separation more complete even than that which must have naturally resulted from absence, distance, and the religious life—for the two friends voluntarily and mutually gave up the pleasure of any direct communication with one another except in case of necessity. Perfectly certain that in spirit they would remain united, they determined not to correspond, and looking forward to an eternal companionship in heaven, accepted freely an entire separation on earth.

This will perhaps surprise those who do not know the ardor with which souls worthy of God's love, that which claims their whole heart, feel constrained to correspond to love by every means in their power, and to give Him all they can in return. Natalie wrote to all those who, if they had not heard from her, would have questioned her affection. But with Marie she knew this could never be the case. In spite of all the material obstacles which separated them, they were more perfectly united than many of the most intimate friends in the world, for to love each other, and find each other, and be united one to another in God—words which seem to many mere forms of speech—were, in the case of those two souls, great and deep truths.

God rewarded their sacrifice by not accepting it in its

fulness. The happiness of meeting again, which they had generously renounced, was vouchsafed to them later, for their separation when Marie left Paris did not prove a final parting.

During the years that Natalie was spending in the Secretary's department of the Mother-house her brother-in-law, the Baron de Petz, was making, as a naval officer, a voyage round the world. We have seen with what affection she mentions, in all her letters, the name of her sister's husband, and never forgets the dear, the good Tonnino. On his side, the young officer, for the sake of his sister-in law, never omitted during his travels to visit, wherever he went, the houses of the daughters of St. Vincent of Paul. He had not, perhaps, expected to find them in all the most distant quarters of the globe, or to hear in all their convents the name and the praises of Sister Narischkin. Her zeal, her activity, her punctuality, her intelligent solicitude for each of those establishments, had endeared her everywhere to the Sisters, who, many of them, had never seen Natalie, but still had been in constant correspondence with her. The Baron de Petz was surprised and touched at this universal feeling with regard to her, and she was pleased and grateful also at hearing how much kindness and respect her brother-in-law had shown to her Sisters in Religion.

Those circumstances are alluded to in Natalie's letters which we will continue to transcribe. We have noticed them beforehand in order to explain the meaning of those passages, and preclude the necessity of further explanations:

TO CATHERINE.

"February 26th, 1855.

"MY DEAR KATE,

"If I had courage for it I should scold you very much, but I cannot find it in my heart to do so. How can you be such an age without writing me a line? I was wait-

ing for a letter from Elisabeth, which you promised me the last time you wrote, when all at once I heard that you were both at Vienna. A line from uncle Demidoff informed me that you were going away the next day. I then relied on receiving a letter from Trieste full of interesting details, and now by one of the 13th, to Sache, I find that you are still at Vienna, and are going to remain there till the end of the week. So all my little hopes have vanished as to a letter from Trieste, and plenty of details in it. I must make up my mind to be patient. Fortunately we are in Lent, and there cannot be a more proper time for mortification and endeavors to die to one's self. The Carmelites receive no letters during Lent; our rule in this respect is not so strict, for it would not be compatible with the spirit of our Order. Scattered as we are all over the world, and occupied with universal interests—for there is not a place where we have not at heart to relieve the poor and to save souls—we are not forbidden to read letters; but now and then, in order to test our readiness to practise a little self-denial out of love for God, we carry in our pockets for two or three days a letter we have been impatiently expecting. You know that our Lord says that a glass of water given in His name will not fail to be rewarded. This leads us to hope that little acts of self-denial practised for His sake are pleasing to Him, and obtain a greater reward; for we know that to give a glass of water does not cost us much effort, but the intention with which we do the smallest acts can give them value, especially if we do not let others observe them. We must be cheerful, amiable, and cordial on every exterior occasion, and keep the rest from any eyes but His, who knows, sees, accepts and rewards everything, and without whose leave nothing can happen.

“I pitied you a little, dear Kate, during your stay at

Vienna, for I think you must have been uncomfortable and bored with all those dinner parties and excursions, if indeed you were obliged to go everywhere. Did uncle Demidoff tell you that I would not consent to have my picture taken for him? Did he seem displeased at my refusal, which he must have received just at the time you were in Vienna? I want you to tell me, because he is so good that I am always afraid of vexing him, and yet it really was a request I could not agree to; I should like to know that he did not take it amiss."

TO HER SISTER ELISABETH.

"I received the other day a magnificent present of rosary beads, and recognized Kate's handwriting in the direction of the parcel; I therefore know they come from her, and I thank her with all my heart for them, but I hoped it would be followed by a little letter, which I am still expecting. Sache, who is quite a dear benefactress to us, tells me that her mother had received a letter from Kate which Tonnino brought to Naples. This gave me great pleasure, as it showed me he was nearer to you than I supposed. I do hope that by the end of another year you will have him at home again. I offered up my Communion for him the day before yesterday, and I should like to know how you all spent the day.*

"Having heard this morning that the cholera is raging at Venice, I feel anxious, and I shall be particularly grateful for news of you whilst it reigns in your neighborhood. How I wish we had sisters in that country!—but it does not seem as if they wished for us.

"I don't know what Anna Marovitch means when she writes to me that there are three houses of our Order in Venice. The little town of Lusingrande has, however,

* The Feast of St. Anthony. Anthony was the name of her brother-in-law.

applied for Sisters. It is at twelve hours' distance from Trieste by sea. You must know about it. We answered that we should be glad to accept the offer, and the director of our house at Gratz has gone there, I think, at the request of our Superiors, to see the place and obtain more ample information. I cannot tell you how much pleased I am at this opening—not because I should expect to be one of the Sisters sent there, for I should be afraid that this would be to go out of the way assigned to me by Providence, and I never shall make an effort to obtain a change in my destination,—but I know by experience the good our Sisters do wherever they are, and that when God calls them anywhere it is to devote themselves to His glory and to the poor, and this application makes me hope that sooner or later we shall get to our dear Venice.

“Write and tell me if the cholera is very bad there, and what you are doing. Also let me know about the baths of Roitsch, and when you are to go there. Do not forget that the 3d of July is uncle Anatole's feast. He was much pleased with a letter I wrote to him on that occasion last year. I had a charming one from him the other day all in his own hand, and when Kate sent me the beads, he added to the parcel a photograph of his mother's tomb at Père la Chaise, which he wishes me to keep as a family souvenir. I have not yet had time to answer that letter, but I mean to do so to-day.

“When will dear little Valentine be able to read a letter? As soon as I hear that she can do so, I shall write to her. One of my companions here receives charming letters from her little niece, who is eight years old. I hope Valentine will write to me. In the meantime, my dear sisters, you must let me hear from you, particularly just now that you are in the midst of the cholera, you must not leave me without news of you.”

TO CATHERINE.

"PARIS, November 28, 1855.

"MY GOOD AND DEAR KATE,

"I have been wishing every day to write to you since I received your little letter, which grieved me very much. I cannot understand ——'s conduct, and I suspend my judgment on that point. But it pains me to think of what you suffer, and I am surprised that the ——s do not seem to take the least heed of it. Perhaps uncle Demidoff's journey to Russia may expedite matters. I hope so with all my heart; and I will write to him when he is there, for he always receives my letters very kindly.

"I regretted very much that the Marquise Strozzi did not see you before her departure. She would have told me so many things about you that would have interested me. She gave me very sad accounts of Teresa.* How deeply tried the friends of God must always be in this world! —and how happy are those who understand that truth!

"I thought a great deal of you, dear Kate, on the Feast of St. Catharine, especially whilst listening to the life of that great Saint in the Martyrology. How happy she was to suffer for God, and what courage she had! You know that she was cruelly persecuted for the faith, and that it was the generous steadfastness with which she defended Catholic truth which obtained for her the grace and glory of martyrdom. So I did not fail to recommend you to that great Saint, and earnestly to beg her to help and support you in the midst of all the difficulties, sorrows, and troubles of this life!

"Oh, if all our friends in this world would understand the advantage of suffering for God, they would not care so much for the enjoyments of life. I have some-

* The Countess de Thûrn.

times heard people say something which made me tremble—that is, that our Lord, who is infinitely merciful and also infinitely just, rewards, perhaps, on earth souls which in the Divine foresight He knows will not go to heaven, and thus gives to purely human good actions the recompense they are entitled to in this world or the next. I think this is a terrible idea, and it has inclined me to quarrel with everything that gives one pleasure on earth. I do not, of course, include in this that peace of the soul and other spiritual enjoyments which are a reward granted to those who in this life are detached from everything, and deny themselves in order to follow our Lord, and at the same time are only a foretaste of those reserved for them in heaven.

“If I had an opportunity for Trieste, I would send you a book lately published which would do you good—‘The Life and Works of the Blessed Henry Suso;’ but you will easily get it in German. There is such a depth of knowledge in this work that one feels as if it was our Lord Jesus Christ Himself who had inspired it, and as if one was compelled to follow its teachings. But enough of so serious a subject. I have perhaps already tired you completely, dear Kate, whom I want so much to be resting in heart, in mind, and in body also, for physical suffering often reacts on both; and at this moment you are in need of strength and courage to bear with patience, and to arrive even at rejoicing over the many trials God sends you! Oh, be sure that I do not forget you in my poor prayers!—and that, above all, what I ask our Lord is, to detach you from all things, and from yourself, so that you may have no other desire but to glorify Him, whether by suffering or joy. The important thing is to arrive—to arrive at Heaven, where happiness will be eternal!

“Do not leave me very long without a few lines from

you. I always think you write too seldom and too briefly; and yet I think it must do you good sometimes to 'sfogarti un poco,'* especially if nothing in your words is against charity.

"Your affectionate Sister,
"NATALIE."

TO HER SISTERS.

"How I have shared your sorrow, my beloved ones!—but I feel certain that in the midst of all your trials, your hearts have been and are still, entirely resigned. I have not heard if, since you wrote, Tonnino has been able to come home, and if he is now consoling by his presence his dear family; but I earnestly hope it may be so. You know, I suppose, that our poor uncle Anatole has been very ill. He wrote to me from Kissingen on the fifteenth of last month, and told me that he had had a second attack. I was deeply grieved at hearing it, for though trials are often merciful dispensations in the case of souls who receive them as warnings sent by God, they nevertheless forebode a sudden death, which is an awful thing for persons who are not familiarized with the thought of dying; so I am beseeching God to have mercy on that dear uncle, and I offer up all my poor little works to obtain for him a holy death in reward for his charity.

"Our director tells me that he read in the papers *that Prince Demidoff* † *had left Paris and returned to Germany*; I cannot understand what that meant. It would surprise me very much that, ill as he was, he should have made a journey to Paris. It is probably Paul that they were speaking of. *He* does not know me, and would not be at all gratified at having a nun for his cousin. He certainly would not have knocked at the door of our community—

* To open and relieve one's heart.

† M. Anatole Demidoff had been made Prince of San Donato by the Duke of Tuscany.

house. But as to uncle Anatole, I do not think he would have come to Paris without letting me know, or coming to see me, if it was only because he knows what a pleasure it is to me. I bless God for the good dispositions of our dear little Valentine; these are real graces which you must try to make her correspond with, by training that little soul from her earliest years to be pious, charitable, truthful, and gentle; and, above all things, by discouraging every tendency to vanity and self-love.

"I quite feel, dear Elisabeth, what it would have been to you to lose such a charming and dear child. And I am sure that you show your gratitude to God, who has preserved her life, by directing towards Him all the love of her little heart.

"You will be surprised to hear that I have seen several times lately poor Francis de Roussy, who has just lost his father. His wife died about a year ago, leaving him with four children. His grief was heart-rending. How many changes and sorrows everywhere! But he is as good and pious as ever, which is a great comfort. He is going to the Chateau de Sales, where his father, whom every one declares was a saint, is to be buried. He asked for your direction, and will write to you. Pray for him!—he is in need of it. And now, my dear friends, what shall I say about my poor self? Why, only that the happiness of a religious vocation is a blessing which every day I understand and appreciate more fully. I have seen that good Father Raphaël of Venice. He is now in Paris, and as good and holy as ever. He comes and talks to me sometimes of Venice, and the good Dorotheas, who also write to me now and then. There is something very sweet in this union between souls consecrated to God! We mutually encourage and help one another, and excite ourselves to become more fervent.

"Our community continues to be very flourishing. We have almost always five hundred young sisters in the novitiate. It is something really wonderful, and it seems as if it was an ark in which people take refuge. But all the religious communities are prospering and increasing just now. God appears to have special mercies in store for souls. Oh! let us bless Him for it. Thank Him also sometimes, my dear sisters, for the great favor He has bestowed on me. It is beyond what I can describe, but it will never make me love you one whit the less. I kiss my dear little Valentine, and I beg her to kiss for me her papa, her mamma, and her aunty Kate, with all the love of her dear little heart. You will tell me if she fulfils this commission.

"By the by, I gave Countess Esterhazy the other day a parcel for you, in which you will find a little book called 'Lessons of the Good Angel.' It is perhaps rather too smartly bound for a present from a poor Sister of Charity, but when you give it to Valentine tell her that, later on, when she gets a purse of her own, she must give me in return an alms for the poor. This reminds me that Roussy educates so well his children in this respect, and teaches them to look upon almsgiving as a duty. One day his eldest boy was hovering about me with a little bag in which his father had put a hundred francs *for the Sister*, and he was watching for the moment to give it to me. In the most modest and prettiest way possible he came up to me and whispered, 'Sister, will you remember sometimes to pray for mamma and us?'"

TO THE VISCOUNTESS DES CARS.

"March 20th, 1858.

"You were my first thought, when I heard of the death of Father de Ravignan. I meant to write to you, but

alas ! such an event is generally too quickly known; and whilst all Paris, and even all Catholic Europe, were occupied with the state of this holy religious, could I imagine that you had not heard of it ? Now, the important thing for souls which had the happiness of being under his direction is, to bear in mind the wise teachings they received from him, and the lights which enabled his extraordinary and wise experience to preserve, to support, to animate, and to establish them in the firm practice of religion. How precious, dear friend, are these remembrances ! Not for all the treasures of earth would we forego them, for they are indeed heavenly treasures. . . .

“ Think of me, dear sister, particularly on the Feast of the Annunciation; pray that it may be to me the starting-point of an entire renewal. I suppose you know that on that day the whole of our Society renew the vows made at other times of the year, and that it is our greatest festival. . . .

“ It would have been very ungrateful of me not to have longed and wished earnestly to tell you sooner how thankful I am for all you have done for our dear missions. How much happiness you will have given !—how many children you will have clothed in that land, once sanctified by the presence of St. Paul !—in that Damascus, once so flourishing, and now changed into a heap of ruins or turned into a receptacle of vice and misery !

“ The news from China by the last mail is disastrous. Poor Kiang-si has been devastated by the rebels. The missionaries have been despoiled of everything. Sacred vessels, altar linen, and all the Church furniture have been seized, since Christmas. Up to the time when they wrote Mass was not said owing to the want of the proper requisites for the Holy Sacrifice, and they did not know

how long this sad privation would last. Poor missionaries! it is hard indeed not to have this consolation in the midst of all their trials and sufferings. It is really a bare cross that our Lord assigns them.

“At Bahia, in Brazil, the population rose against the Sisters. They have not actually been murdered, as was reported, but were struck, trodden under foot, and dragged through the streets. Nothing could be more admirable than their feelings in the midst of all this. God be blessed for it, and for giving them the spirit of Apostles. We have just lost four of them. They died like saints.”

At that time accounts reached Natalie which contradicted the hopes she had formed in consequence of M. Anatole Demidoff's considerate kindness to herself. She had fondly supposed that this respect was evinced not only towards her, but towards faith, virtue, and truth, of which the habit she was wearing was the type, and, as it were, the well-known livery. To think that this was not the case proved a severe disappointment to that pure and fervent heart, and made her deeply anxious. “Oh, how far I was from expecting what you tell me about our poor uncle Anatole! The bare idea that his poor soul may rush into such danger dismays me, and makes my blood run cold. Can one conceive such a thing in a man with one foot in the grave, and who in an instant may lose his soul forever?—in a man whose eyes have seemed sometimes opened enough to the light of hope and truth, to make him triumph over those terrible passions which make it, alas! so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Oh, how we must multiply our prayers and supplications for him!

“I am so glad that you like ‘All for Jesus,’ and I shall willingly send you another copy of it. We all delight

in that book. I read it in English, and found it incomparably more beautiful in the language in which Father Faber wrote it. Oh! how we must try, dear Kate, to practice everything it teaches! All for Jesus! Oh, yes!—all for Him!—in life, and in death, and for a happy eternity!”

Father Etienne, the venerable Superior-General of the Sisters of Charity, always quickly discerned amidst the numerous family of which he was the head and the father, those who rose higher than the ordinary level of their holy vocation. He had soon observed the qualities and gifts with which Sister Narischkin was endowed, and though he did not indulge her, but on the contrary, as was his way when dealing with courageous souls, imposed upon her arduous and difficult duties, still he particularly cared for Natalie, and numbered her amongst his favorite children. He had witnessed her hard and unwearied labor, and perhaps noticed, though she never complained of it, that she was suffering from fatigue; and in the year 1858 he resolved to secure for her at once a little rest and a great joy. The affairs of the Order were calling him to Italy. He took Natalie to Rome with him, where she had the happiness of kneeling at the feet of Pius IX. Just at the time when she was about to enter on the last and most trying period of her life, she received that sacred and paternal blessing. Her soul had indeed by that time acquired a peace and an equality which was never again disturbed; but two trials were awaiting her which she had not up to that time experienced—a heavy responsibility in a position uncongenial to her tastes, and the gradual failure of her health and strength. Natalie was surrounded by several of her Sisters when she was received by the Holy Father, who welcomed them with his usual kindness. But after they had all bowed down again before withdrawing, Natalie

remained on her knees near the seat of the Holy Father. He saw that she wished to speak to him, and bent down to listen to her.

The Sisters stood a little way off, and watched with emotion the gracious and paternal manner of the Pope, and the expression of Natalie's face whilst she knelt at his feet and raised her head to speak words to him which no one else could hear. This lasted a few minutes, and then the Holy Father smiled, gave her his blessing, and, turning to the other Sisters, said, "*Voilà une sainte fille,*"* which words gave occasion, later on, to her companions to tease the humble Sister Narischkin by telling her that the Pope had canonized her during her lifetime.

This audience was the principal event of Natalie's journey into Italy. By the side of this great privilege we can but barely mention the pleasure she felt at beholding again those fair skies which reminded her of her childhood, and also of those subsequent days when she had received the most vivid impressions, and formed the most important resolutions of her life.

From Rome she went to Florence, where her uncle, Anatole Demidoff, was residing. He inhabited a magnificent villa, in the vicinity of which he had founded a house of Sisters of Charity,—one amongst many other generous acts which honor his memory. His own house, called Quarto,—where after his death the Grand Duchess Marie lived—was filled twice in the course of a few years with all that wealth, and luxury, and magnificence can gather together to adorn an earthly abode; and twice also was it visited by death, which throws so awful a light on all human concerns. There was no need, in Natalie's case, of this stern monitor to make her estimate at their just rate those accumulated treasures.

* That is a holy daughter.

We can easily guess what were her thoughts and feelings during the visits she paid her uncle at Quarto. He was too ill to come to Florence, and several times she went to him. We may truly say that she entered that house like a messenger from heaven; that she was received with respect, veneration, and affection, and we may venture to hope that her holy and gentle words were not uttered in vain. It was indeed the moment for such words to find an echo in the heart of the possessor of so many earthly treasures, for he had already found out that they had given him no real happiness, and that even had they done so, they were fleeting from his grasp.

We can hardly think that those long conversations proved fruitless, or that the ardent prayers which accompanied them were not heard and granted. We cannot, indeed, affirm that such was the case, but hope and charity permit us to believe it.

It was on her way back from one of those visits that Natalie, unused to the temperature of a heated drawing-room, caught a severe cold, and felt the first symptoms of an illness which threatened to be serious at that time, and the results of which were even yet more disastrous. She was not able to return to France with Father Etienne, and it was weeks before she could travel, and at last resume her post at the Mother-house; but her health never entirely recovered that illness. Though she looked after a while much as usual, never from that time did she enjoy a single day of that full possession of physical strength which so efficiently seconds moral energy. We do not appreciate that strength till we are deprived of it, and the soul is left to act alone without the ready co-operation of the obedient and submissive slave which used so well to fulfil its biddings.

It was a little before that time that Madame Swetchine—another Russian whose name will ever be honored and

loved in France—a model of holiness, of highmindedness, and of patience in suffering, had departed this life. Those two souls, united by the same faith and the same courage—both of them an honor to the land of their birth and the country they had adopted—lived close to one another, and yet very seldom met. It was not the difference between their ages that would have stood in the way of their intimacy. The young as well as the old found in Madame Swetchine the same kindness, the same charm, the same intelligent and ready sympathy. So great was the charm of her society that it made all other companionship dull and uninteresting in comparison. But Natalie had been in Paris only a few months before she had entered the seminary, and since then her life had been concentrated in her Secretary's work. Madame Swetchine had therefore seen her but very seldom; but she watched with the most intense interest the course of her young countrywoman's courageous life, and Natalie loved and venerated her, as did all those who had ever been in communication with that chosen soul. She shared the sorrow which filled so many hearts at that irreparable loss.

It might indeed be a real subject of pride to the Russian nation—if they could arrive at feeling it—that the most perfect type of perfection of mind and heart in the life of the world, and the highest degree of sanctity in the religious vocation, were to a great degree realized in Paris, and in our days, by two of their countrywomen.

CHAPTER XVI.

1858.



TEN years had elapsed since Natalie had entered on the duties of the Secretaryship—ten years during which she had perfectly accomplished all her exterior duties, and made at the same time an amount of progress in the interior life which we can guess from the tone of her letters, but by no means estimate. It did not, however, escape the experienced discernment of her Superiors. They thought the time had arrived for her to occupy a post less congenial to her pious tastes and her humility, and to bear the burden of more difficult duties and a heavier responsibility. She was far from imagining, however, what this change was to be, when one day she was sent for by Father Etienne, who in the presence of the Mother-General announced to her, not only that she was to leave the Mother-house, but also that she was going to be placed at the head of a community. She was struck dumb with surprise; not all her spirit of obedience could hide the consternation she felt at this news. It involved not only the relinquishment of her silent labors, mingled with recollection and prayer, but also that of a completely obscure and retired life such as her soul loved. This obscurity was not perhaps as complete as she imagined; but the fame which her correspondence had won for her in distant countries found no echo in the humble scene of her labors. Through her letters she was in communication with every part of the world; and yet she felt herself unknown—for in the daily habits of life nothing distinguished her from her Sisters.

At first it seemed to her that the task assigned to her was beyond her strength. Her grief and reluctance were so great that they made her almost faint away, but still she never dreamt of resisting the will of her Superiors; only, in this instance, obedience seemed to her a hard and difficult duty, and it cost her a great effort to bend her will to it. We shall see how she achieved it, and how well she justified the words of Father Etienne to the Sisters of the little community she was about to govern. He said that he was giving them *a pearl*, and that they must take great care of her; "for if you were to lose her," he added, "I should find it difficult to supply another of the same value."

The name given to the Superior of a house of St. Vincent of Paul is "Sœur Servante"—"Sister Servant"—and certainly that name was never so appropriate as in the case of Sœur Natalie. Amongst her companions there were some who could not help smiling at the idea of "the figure that dear Sister would cut at the head of the temporal affairs of a house,"—a sort of thing she had never been accustomed to; and also the fact of her being placed in authority—she who seemed able only to pray and obey, and give way to others with that humble and submissive manner which was natural to her.

To these misgivings were joined the regret at "the little Saint's" departure from the Mother-house. Her presence in what she called "that blessed Ark," had produced a never-to-be-forgotten effect, and many were the regrets which the loss of the Sœur Natalie left behind her.

"To her"—the same record relates—"it was a much greater effort to be placed at the head of fifteen Sisters than it had been to take the lowest place when she had joined the community. She continued to be as simple, as modest, and as closely united to God as before; that

is indeed saying too little, for she felt more than ever that union with our Lord was the element in which she was to find strength for the multitude of duties and the wider scope of charity assigned to her."

These words describe Natalie beforehand during this new period of her life. Her occupations were changed, but to the end of her life she continued to feel a tender and ardent interest in the trials and needs of the missionaries, and to employ herself in helping them with a zeal which up to her last hour never slackened. She followed them incessantly in thought and in prayer. The trials and efforts of the Church in distant countries touched her as much as the sufferings under her own eyes, and when alms were left at her own disposal, she considered that to divide them between the poor amongst whom she lived and the missionaries who were evangelizing the heathen, was to act according to the spirit of the Gospel.

With the exception of this sympathy and participation in those Apostolic labors to which her own had been so long devoted, everything for her and about her was changed. Instead of the Mother-house with its beautiful chapel, its spacious rooms, and its large garden, she now inhabited a small house in the Rue St. Guillaume, in the parish of St. Thomas d'Aquin. And instead of the methodical and solitary life which she had been leading for ten years in the Secretary's office—a life in which every hour had its regular employment, and the same leisure always secured for meditation and prayer,—she was charged with a responsibility that obliged her to be at every moment at every one's disposal.

If, on the one hand, it was impossible that she should leave without regret her dear and delightful occupation, it would not have been in keeping with her firmness of character, her submission, or rather her love of the will of

God, to look back wistfully to the past, and not to devote herself heart and soul to this new way of serving Him. Moreover, she soon found that these exterior duties did not separate her from Him in whom and for whom she lived; that to become more actively still the servant of the poor, was to be His servant in a most special sense. It is hardly necessary to describe the tender solicitude and the zeal with which she visited that large outward family, towards which she and her fifteen Sisters were to be, as it were, Mother and Sisters. This part of her duties was light and easy, but there were others which required qualities of another sort than mere devotedness.

The house in the Rue St. Guillaume, dark and narrow as it was, contained not only external classes, but also an orphanage, an infant nursery, and an asylum for old women. It had also the direction of the Bureau de Bienfaisance of that part of the town, and of several other parochial charities, each of which had its own distinct administration and budget. Some of them being entirely dependent on private support, it required a singular amount of order and foresight to manage simultaneously these various good works, and much ability and economy to make the most of their resources and keep them going. Natalie, who had thought herself even more incapable than her companions deemed her of such a task, soon, however, justified the entirely different opinion her Superiors had formed of her capabilities. Without hesitation and without haste, without presumption or over-anxiety, she went quietly to work, and was soon so well able to meet all the requirements of her new position that, as her companions said, "one would always have imagined that the only thing she had to attend to was the particular duty or occupation of the moment." And indeed, in spite of the time which so

many good works absorbed, of her daily visits to the poor, and the many walks she had to take in order to relieve their wants; of the intercourse she had been obliged to renew with the families in the Faubourg St. Germain who could assist in her charities; of the particular care with which she used to seek out persons in reduced circumstances ashamed to acknowledge their poverty—in spite, I say, of so many exterior calls, Natalie never seemed absent from her post at the head of her community. The glass door of her humble little sitting-room, looking on the court, was always readily opened to all those who in their spiritual and temporal wants sought Sister Narischkin's sympathy or aid. That little room, with its straw chairs, dark-colored walls, and common little stove, which at first sight seemed so dull and depressing, assumed a new aspect in the eyes of the poor; a brighter one than many a rich abode where they went to beg for help. Courage, consolation, and hope seemed to shine upon them in the small parlor of the Rue St. Guillaume.

Sometimes Natalie invited her visitors into what was called the Superioress's office, a small recess which could just hold her writing-table and two straw chairs, and where the interruptions were not quite so frequent as in the outer room; and it was indeed no small privilege to sit there opposite to the dear Sister, and speak with her without reserve or constraint. Sometimes without her even uttering a word, the calm and earnest expression of her countenance imparted peace to the hearts of those who sought her counsel. God only knows the number of those who entered that little room overwhelmed with heavy trouble, and who came away from it encouraged, comforted, and strengthened to bear bravely their heavy weight of care. Further on, we shall speak again of this life of intimate and intense charity,

the active exercise of which was rapidly to wear out the life of Sœur Natalie; but before we proceed with our narrative, it will be well to let her describe herself some of her feelings at the outset of this last and most important period of her existence.

MAISON DE SECOURS, RUE ST. GUILLAUME, 13,
PARISH OF ST. THOMAS D'AQUIN,
November 19th, 1858.

"It is very long since we have written to each other, and how many things, alas! have happened to me since then! The printed direction at the top of my letter will show you that I am no longer in our dear Mother-house, but in the midst of all the cares of parochial life. Pray for me, my dear friend, that I may not injure the works of God, and be so unfortunate as to prove an obstacle to the bestowal of His graces on this poor little family of fifteen Sisters, and the multitude of children who depend upon them! But oh, when shall I ever enjoy again the happiness of that hidden life which I had the happiness of leading up to this time! . . .

"I cannot, however, forget my dear missions, and my heart is still full of them; and so I hope that to comfort me a little you will think of the dear Saint whose feast we are about to celebrate on the 3d of December.* You will not be here at that time, but it will not signify if you authorize me to do in your name what we did other years in honor of that day.

"We have no very particular news from our foreign missions just now. At Bahia there is a very satisfactory burst of charitable feeling in every part of the town. At Lisbon everything is quieter; and the Sisters can go about more freely at St. Petersburg. Father Souaillard (a Dominican) preaches sermons which everybody goes

* St. Francis Xavier, the Patron Saint of Missionaries.

to hear. He was to have returned in time to preach during Advent at St. Sulpice, but they keep him at St. Petersburg till May. Thank God for it! He knows how to make up to us for the sacrifices He requires. He alone knows how great is the one He has appointed me. My poor Sister Caille, and all my other dear companions, have felt and shared it with me. But He who has done and suffered so much for our souls deserves every sacrifice we can make. May we never refuse anything He asks of us. At this moment I feel all the bitterness of the cup, but I am determined with the most sincere will to drink it to the dregs." . . .

She surmounted all her regrets and dislikes, and soon became a perfect type of that spiritual Motherhood, which, strange as it may seem to many, has cares as sweet and joys as deep as those of mothers in the natural order. We shall see how much Natalie loved the Sisters and the children who surrounded her, and how she was in return beloved by those whom she governed with a hand as firm as it was tender. These new occupations and solitudes did not alter in the least the simplicity of her intercourse with her relatives and friends. We only feel that the fire of love which was increasing in her heart is more and more evinced in all she writes and does. At the end of 1858, she says to her sister: "When I think of all the graces I have received, I cannot understand that love and gratitude do not entirely consume my whole being.

"It is so different to live *in the truth*, to appreciate everything according to its real worth—evil in order to fly from it, and good in order to pursue it. We then easily understand that the worldly and frivolous education so often given in the world has no other object than that of stimulating self-love, and makes it almost im-

possible not to make shipwreck over and over again. How many tokens of mercy I have received, and how gratuitously they were bestowed on a poor creature who spent her life in offending God! I feel it so much since I have dwelt in the hollow of the rock,—the blessed refuge of God's house. Oh, what would I not give that every one could see things in their true light!"

In the month of August, 1860, she wrote to the Viscountess Des Cars the following touching narrative: "You know, perhaps, by this time, how merciful the God of St. Vincent of Paul has been to our Sisters at Damascus, where, at nine o'clock in the evening, Abdel Kader's Algerines arrived at the door of their house to save them. They were preparing for martyrdom, and receiving the Holy Viaticum. The missionaries had been all day engaged in hearing the confessions of the Sisters and the children. They all thought that they were doomed to a certain death, and at first were almost afraid to open the door, and it was only by dint of knocking and encouraging cheers that those good Algerines reassured them and obtained entrance. Unfortunately, they could only carry them away by detachments; the last had to wait till eleven o'clock, in dreadful alternations of hope and fear. When the Emir's son came to fetch them the Turks were so near that five minutes later it would have been too late to save the Sisters. As soon as they had left it, their poor little house was invaded and destroyed. They beheld this sad devastation. Nothing was saved but their lives, and they heard the words uttered, 'Here they are, let us kill them.'

"Fortunately they were well escorted, and after an hour and a half of painful and toilsome walking over the ruins, they at last arrived at a place of shelter, quite exhausted in body and in mind. They were received with

the greatest kindness and sympathy. What can we say to our Lord in gratitude for such an escape! We feel at such moments as if our hearts were too small; and a wish to expand and extend them in every direction. Help us to thank God!"

"PARIS, Feast of St. Andrew, 1860.

"I have to inform you of the martyrdom of Father Gaëtano Massa, which happened in China in the month of August. How many graces have been granted to that family! It is from one of our Lazarist Missionaries that we heard this event. He says in his letter: 'This Father, the fourth in his family who embraced the Apostolic life, arrived in Kiang-Nam only to die a violent death. The fifth son was lately delivered by our troops. He had been captured by pirates, and was threatened with the same fate as his brother. The mother of these five heroes of charity has left the world, we hear, and retired into a cloister.' These details showed me at once that this martyr was my dear Father Gaëtano,* whom I knew had gone back to China. I cannot tell you with what joy I now invoke him! If the world is silent as to all these things, in heaven we shall hear of the glory of these blessed souls!"

"August, 1862.

✓ "I heard yesterday that on the 4th Madame Obrescoff died quite suddenly. I have been deeply grieved at this news. She had just arrived at Vichy alone, with her maid, and that very night she expired. Pray for her as I shall do as long as I live. She was so kind to me. I have reasons to be grateful to her which I can never forget.†

* One of the friends of her childhood at Sorrento.

† It was this excellent friend who had taken Catherine and Natalie to Brussels, in 1843, on the day of Olga's death.

"I do not know if you will be able to read this scrawl, but the children frightened me so much just now that I am trembling all over. They screamed so dreadfully that I ran up-stairs terrified, and found—what do you think?—that a mouse was running under the table. That was indeed an event to throw a whole house into agitation! Every one who heard those piercing screams was of course alarmed. What a courageous set of little girls we have!

"I have to thank you for your gifts, which could not have arrived at a better moment than the eve of New Year's Day. Now that I am the Mother of so large a family you can easily fancy how doubly acceptable is everything which enables me to give pleasure to my children—only I had not time to write. I have been, and am still, suffering from a stitch in the side, which has confined me to my bed for several days, and even now a large plaster on my right side will not allow me to wear our habit; so I cannot dress, but I can write, as you see, which shows you I am much better.

"Try to find out for me, dear Kate, where L—— is now. She once told me that she meant to adopt a child. When she said this to me I had none of my own, but now that I possess seventy children I should like to remind her of this wish. By the by, as you ask me if I am reconciled to my new position, I will tell you with the most perfect sincerity that it is God's will to make it abound with consolations, though they are mixed with some thorns. If it was not for the weight of responsibility all would be well. But if you knew what it is to feel that I have to answer for so many souls entrusted to my care! We are fifteen Sisters here, amongst whom there is one much older than myself. The object is to make them all find obedience easy and sweet, and then to watch over the temporal and spiritual welfare of

everybody—of our old women as well as of our young people, who with the day scholars and the girls of the Patronage are three hundred in number.

“But I cannot describe to you the consolation these children gave me the day of their first Communion, and during the retreat which preceded it, by their recollection and piety. It was really too delightful to say the Rosary with them in their work-room. They had excellent instructions; and the rest of the time was spent in pious reading, manual work in silence, meditation, and singing hymns. On the day of the first Communion, our poor little orphans sang, accompanied by the organ, in such a very pious and charming manner that everybody was astonished. But pray a great deal for me. Responsibility is a heavy burden!”

On the 10th of September, 1860, she heard of the death of the Vicomte Des Cars, and wrote the following letter to the dearest of her friends in that her hour of sudden and terrible bereavement:

“I have just heard of the affliction which has befallen you, and it awakens in the depth of my heart the feelings of a sister and of a friend. I wish I was with you, that you might feel it; but I know that earthly consolations are nothing to you now. You are impelled to seek them there where it is right to look for them, and where they can never fail you. Oh, what a day in which to suffer!—that of the Nativity of Mary—of Mary born for suffering, and who could not see a heart dearer to her learning on this day what she understood so well all through her life! Yes, dear friend, she will help you to carry this heavy cross. . . . Accept it with courage; and by her intercession may Jesus make you feel that to suffer with Him is better than all the joys of this world. You have always understood it; but there are times when the soul is over-

come, and that is why I beseech our Lord to be your support and strength. You must remember that you are a mother, and that your children have a double claim upon you now."

A few months afterwards it is the affliction of friends, always so dear to her, which fills her heart with sorrow:

"Françoise de Maistre* yielded up her beautiful soul to God on the 29th of July, at Beaumesnil, where her family live. I have the happiness of seeing every year one or another of those dear and holy people,—sometimes the Count, sometimes one of his brothers. Madame de Terray comes the oftenest. The day before yesterday it was dear Marie who was with me; she grows more and more holy, and each time I see her I am more edified. I heard from her all the particulars of Frances' pious death, for she arrived ten days before at Beaumesnil. What a blessing it is to live as a Saint, seeing we die as we have lived! Marie told me also some edifying things about Xaverine; young as she is, and always in pain, she is by her words and her example quite an apostle, and like a little St. Catherine of Sienna,—by her fervor and the zeal for the glory of God which burns in her heart.† The De Maistres established a few years ago, at Beaumesnil, a house of our Sisters. I know some of them, and when they come to Paris I am quite in admiration at all they tell me of that dear family, with whom they are in constant communication.

"My faithful Sister Barba is still very fond of me, and helps me very much. She came to see me yesterday, and

* The daughter of Count Rudolph de Maistre.

† We may add here what she wrote in 1862: "Xaverine de Maistre has entered a Carmelite Convent. Her generous parents have made this sacrifice, like so many others, with the greatest courage. They are alone now, but heaven, which they are looking to, will be their reward for all they have given to God."

brought me some barley-sugar because they had told her I coughed a good deal."

This incessant cough, and that stitch in the side which she mentions in one of her preceding letters, were, alas! slowly but surely undermining her strength. It was only by dint of constant efforts that she accomplished her numerous and fatiguing duties. But for a long time she concealed the amount of those efforts, and only smiled when she was questioned about her health.

Natalie was not afraid of suffering, and still less of dying. But she was content to live in the enjoyment of obedience and activity, and her soul enjoyed all the elements of that peace which the world has no conception of. To love life, to be happy to die, and not to dread suffering, is not that real happiness?—and is not a soul thus blest armed at all hours?

CHAPTER XVII.

1858.



IMPERFECTLY as we have hitherto accomplished our task, the readers of this biography have been able to follow the course of Sœur Natalie's life, and to form some idea of the successive developments of her soul. But in the same way as the difficulty of ascending a mountain goes on increasing as we approach the summit, so do we find more and more difficulty in writing this narrative as we draw near to the end of an existence, every step of which was an ascension. At this point of our work, we would fain call upon that dear soul—now delivered as it is from every fear, and especially that of pride, which she had so great a dread of—and beg of her to help us not to praise her, but to praise that God whom she so much loved, and to describe so that it may be understood that mysterious spiritual transfiguration so impossible to realize humanly speaking, and yet such an admirable subject of contemplation even for those to whom it is not given to approach the sublime heights where it is consummated. How often, whilst dwelling on those touching recollections, has our heart ached and our eyes filled with tears, as we thought of the hatred which seeks beforehand to influence popular passions against these friends of the poor, of the people, and of the countries where, at this very moment, they are pursued, persecuted, banished, and forced to seek a shelter in distant lands across the ocean—that cruel ocean which not long ago swallowed up in its billows, as merciless as their

enemies, several of those pure and innocent victims.* These are thoughts which would disturb the mind and embitter the soul were it not that the whole of Christianity is founded on the idea of a Divine union between innocence and suffering, and that it promises an inestimable efficacy to all sacrifices offered up in union with the great sacrifice of the Divine and heavenly Victim.

In the last chapter we gave a simple outline of the various duties to which Sister Natalie devoted all the energies of a strong will and an ardent charity, which up to nearly the end of her life continued to supply the place of the strength which was gradually failing her. By means of a number of documents in our hands, we will describe with greater detail this last period of her life, and show what she was in her daily intercourse with her Sisters, with the children under her care, with her friends; and, as far as may be permitted to our weakness to penetrate into the intimate sanctuary of her soul—with God Himself.

The revolutionary hurricane which for nearly a hundred years has raged with more or less long intervals in France, has not spared, at times, the Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul, though it has often happened that the simple good sense of the people proved sufficient to protect them against the efforts of a senseless malignity. One might even go so far as to say that it is rather the fashion to except them from the general attacks on Religious Orders—an exception which they would be the

* On the 7th of December, 1875, five poor nuns, driven out of the Convent of Saltzrothen, in Westphalia, were drowned on their way to America, not far from the coast of Ireland. The vessel perished with all on board. The victims of the cruel laws now persecuting the Catholics of Germany were—Barbara Hultenschmidt, Henrica Fasbænder, Norberta Reinhover, Aurea Badzinz, and Briggitte Damhorst.

first to protest against, were they aware of the fact. But they are for the most part unconscious of the abuse lavished on their cloistered Sisters, and of the praises which worldly people,—who fancy that to pray like the Carmelites is to do nothing, and that to work like the Sisters of Charity is not in itself a prayer,—are ready to bestow on their own vocation. It has been indeed wisely said, “that there are people whom their enemies cannot safely come into contact with, if they want to go on hating them” It is therefore natural that the opportunities of seeing and knowing the Sisters of Charity, which result from the duties of their vocation, should have tended to disarm enmity and soften animosity, which abstract arguments would never have overcome.

If this is true with regard to all the Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul, it especially applies to those who are appointed to govern their communities. It has often struck me that if a great assembly was called together for the express purpose of bestowing special honors on women who possess the manly gifts of wisdom, intelligence, discernment, and courage, and at the same time carry to the highest pitch the virtues peculiar to their sex—piety, purity, charity, and self-devotion—the foremost in merit, the first in rank, amongst those chosen souls would be the holy and valiant band of those women—the mothers, the sisters, and the guides of their companions—and who have attained, I am not afraid of saying so, not only the height of Christian virtue, but also that feminine perfection the idea of which they alone fully realize.

Sister Natalie had her appointed place amongst those chosen souls. In that house of the Rue St. Guillaume, which she so admirably governed for seventeen years, it is impossible not to feel, that in spite of its unattractive appearance there is a lingering perfume of sanctity which

speaks of the holy influence so long pervading it. We find there not merely a community retaining the pious remembrance of a venerated superior, but a sorrowing family mourning over the irreparable loss of a beloved mother. As soon as Sœur Natalie's name is mentioned, the faces of all the Sisters reveal their tender affection for their late Superior, and volumes could be written full of the details they so lovingly relate.

As it is impossible to transcribe all these touching reminiscences, we shall draw from them the best picture we can of that young and humble Superior who assumed the reins of government with so much dread and reluctance, and who contrived to hold them with such a firm and gentle hand.

Sister Natalie knew so perfectly how to obey, that in spite of all her humility she could not but admit the fact, that never once during the ten years she had spent in the Secretary's office at the Mother-house had she failed with regard to that virtue. But at the same time she possessed all the requisite qualities for the government and direction of others. Together with an exact observance of the holy rule of her Order, and a spirit of mortification which made her treat her body with the utmost contempt, she ever preserved that sweet and attractive gentleness which, as by a spell, led on others to perfection, and prevented her ever appearing too austere. But this characteristic sweetness, which gave her so singular an influence over the children as well as the Sisters under her care, did not interfere with the firmness which when necessary she knew how to evince. Her countenance on these occasions commanded instant respect. One of her companions said that she would rather have performed the severest penance than have seen those eyes, so sweet in their usual expression, fixed upon her with severity. Reproofs, however, were sel-

dom necessary. Sister Natalie inspired her companions with that desire of perfection which filled her own soul, and next to the happiness of having fulfilled a duty, they knew no greater joy than that of pleasing their dear Superior. They watched her countenance in order to make sure that nothing in their manners, their words, or their acts, had disturbed its sweet equanimity, for Natalie took to heart the least imperfection in their conduct, and the suffering it caused her was visible in her face.

But notwithstanding this holy strictness, nothing could exceed her tenderness and kindness to those for whose perfection she was so keenly solicitous, not only in the daily habits of their common life, in which she herself was always a model of amiability, but in every possible respect. In whatever sorrow they had to endure, whether spiritual trials or anxieties, or grief with regard to their families, no mother could have shown a more affectionate, intelligent, and persevering sympathy. Nothing which interested them was ever indifferent to her. They could always command the resources of her acute and clear mind, and the warm feelings of her heart. Indeed, when any one has seen the treasures of a heart given to God poured forth in their rich abundance, it almost provokes a smile to hear people of the world claim a monopoly of deep affections.

In the midst of this influential position, Sister Natalie's modest manners never changed. One of her companions relates, that having been sent from a house in the provinces to the Mother-house, in order to proceed from thence to the one of the Rue St. Guillaume, she met there a gentle, humble-looking Sister who offered to show her the way to her future home. The offer was accepted, and also that of making over her bundle to her companion, who carried it all the way. It was only

when they arrived that the new-comer found out that it was her Superior whom she had treated in so free-and-easy a manner. Feeling much ashamed she began to beg her pardon, but Sœur Natalie stopped her excuses by such a hearty burst of laughter that the young sister was obliged to laugh also; and this leads us to speak of a peculiarity in her character which will complete the picture we are trying to draw. This was a frank, ready, and expansive merriment,—a quality which we have often remarked in persons broad in mind and pure in heart. Sister Natalie's companions tell us, that "if she heard or noticed something funny, it made her laugh so that she was obliged to hold her sides and cry for mercy." This merriment, the involuntary and spontaneous result of the interior joy which overflowed her soul, was totally unlike the laughter too often excited in worldly people by levity of thought and ill-natured ridicule. Sœur Natalie would have wept at what makes such persons laugh; but where nothing of that sort was in question she manifested a child-like gayety, "which, when it arises from purity of heart and a serene life, out-lives grief, and reappears after stormy hours like the sunshine of a soul at peace."*

These words, applied with truth to others in former days, are even more strongly applicable to her whom I am describing—one who had been severed so early from earth's troubles and cares, and who was enjoying a fore-taste of eternal peace.

Children were peculiarly sensible to the charm of Natalie's endearing qualities. They are gifted, generally speaking, with a sort of supernatural perception. Has not our Lord said of those little ones, "their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father;"† and may we

* "A Sister's Story."

† Matt. xviii. 10.

not suppose that those same angels inspire them with a secret attraction for souls which more particularly reflect the Divine image? Be that as it may, Sister Natalie inspired a wonderfully devoted and strong affection to her little charges, and exercised an extraordinary influence over all young people. Her words, her example, the manner in which she knew how to praise and encourage them, the way in which she wisely guided their consciences were all animated by that true charity to which God concedes—as well as to faith—the power of working miracles. A number of young girls thus grew up under her wing to whom she proved a guardian angel. From the work-room of the Rue St. Guillaume they went forth in various directions, and are now living in the midst of that immense and dangerous Paris, so full of snares for youth and poverty—those true children of Sister Narischkin, as they love to call themselves—they continue in their various positions to do honor to the memory of their Mother, by their persevering fidelity to her teachings, and the promises they made to her.

Amongst a number of other instances, I will quote the testimony of a young seamstress who, when she heard of the work we are engaged in, sent us the letters she had received from her whose humble child she had been, and expressed her love for that dear Mother with a simple and touching eloquence:

“Nothing that I could say to you, Madame,” she wrote, “would describe what she was to me. She was my Mother, that is all I can say! and such a Mother!—the Mother of my heart! How she watched over me in the difficult days of early life! How anxious she used to get if she lost sight of me—she who had so much else to think of! Once, she burnt for me, during a whole fortnight, the lamp which she used to light at the foot of the image of our Lady of Lourdes; and now that she is in

heaven, I feel the unmistakable effects of her protection. Oh! how I go on loving that dear Mother! I will always lead a good life so as to deserve to meet her hereafter."

We will also transcribe one of the letters which that good Mother wrote in return to her child. It will show the way in which she had set about winning her heart:

"MY DEAR LITTLE P——,

"As I do not know your new direction, which you have been giddy enough not to give me, I delayed a little answering your letter. But I think with your name, and a good hunt in the house of the Rue St. Guillaume, that they will be able to find you out. If not, so much the worse; the letter will be returned to the postman with *unknown* written upon it. Oh, what a blessing it would be if you could be indeed *unknown* to creatures and known only to God! Do not you think so, dear child? Have an ardent wish to know Him. Apply yourself earnestly to this great and useful science, and your time will be well spent, whether you are washing the plates, or employed in the kitchen, or busy in the great work-room, or yet again at St. Cloud. Wherever you are, and at all times, keep your heart fixed on the Heart of Jesus. Be occupied with Him, and with efforts to please Him. You know what our Lord said to one of His faithful servants—St. Gertrude, I think, or St. Catherine of Sienna—'Think of Me, my daughter, and I will think of thee.' It is sweet indeed to feel that Jesus thinks of us, and we can have that perfect conviction, my dear child, and cherish and foster it in our souls—for there is only one condition attached to it, and that condition is in our own power.

"Thank you for your good prayers for me, the effects of which I am conscious of. Go on praying for me, and believe me always yours in Christ,

"SISTER NARISCHKIN."

Another day she writes to the same young girl a long letter, which ends thus:

"I have nothing to send you to-day except a kiss in honor of the feast of your holy patron, and earnest and sincere wishes that you may daily increase in holiness. . . . I think I shall be at home again at the beginning of next week. You will then pay me a visit, and *tête-à-tête* in my room you will tell me all your little troubles with that simplicity which I always find and so much like in you, and if you need a little bit of a scolding I shall be sure to give it. Come now, dear child of our good God, have then a little courage, and with His grace and a really good will, you will do everything you ought. Give up everything rather than lose everything. You understand what I mean; and you will be sure, won't you, to come and see me on Sunday? I shall expect you.

"Your affectionate and devoted

"MOTHER."

A few days afterwards, she says:

"God be praised, my very dear child! I was anxiously awaiting this little word from you. Your silence made me uneasy. I am pleased with you, my dear. Be always thus frank and open with your Mother, and God will bless you. The little lamp is still burning for you. . . . Pray for me."

This young girl had left the work-room of the Rue St. Guillaume at the age of twenty-one, and in one of the most noisy parts of Paris was employed in a house of business, where she earned enough to support her mother and herself. Every night she brought home her earnings to the humble lodgings in the suburbs where they lived together, and thus had to walk to and fro each day through the crowded thoroughfares of the gay city. Many were the temptations and snares in her way, and she could have pleaded the excuse of poverty so often

urged by those who fall into sin—for it was only hard and incessant toil that preserved her from destitution. She has had, however, the will and the grace to remain worthy of the Mother and friend whose memory continues to support and strengthen her.

At the same time as we pay this tribute to the humble and courageous virtues of this dear child of Sister Natalie's, we cannot refrain from congratulating the large number of young persons in a similar rank of life, who tread the same path, and give the same example in the midst of all the temptations of Paris. May God bless them and the devoted women whose vigilant watchfulness protects and befriends them! We may hope that these pure, courageous, hidden lives will avert some of the judgments which sooner or later overtake scandalous sins. They are, at any rate, a consolation to those who behold, with aching hearts, the mad career of so many girls of the same rank, but not protected in the same way who are rushing forward in idleness, unbelief, and pride, towards the future abyss which awaits them!

In Sœur Natalie's letters, which we have already quoted, her faithful and tender attachment to her friends has been so often evinced that it seems superfluous to revert to it again. We wish, however, to point out that amongst all these affections, none are more conspicuous than those relating to her native land, from which she was in a double manner separated. Nothing regarding Russia was ever indifferent to Sister Natalie. Her heart, otherwise so free from human cares, was always moved by anything which concerned the country of her birth; and when, later on, the cholera broke out in St. Petersburg, we shall see the feelings with which her charity and her love for Russia inspired her.

This patriotic feeling, so strong in that country, in-

creased in this chosen soul in proportion as her growth in holiness and the clearness of her views enabled her to understand better the past and the present, and to look forward to the future. She saw that all which the Greek Church had given her in the days of her childhood and youth had been confirmed and expanded by the teachings of the Catholic Church, and completed by the religious life. The dogmas she had always received with faith she now held in a more firm manner, since she believed in the visible seat of an invisible authority. Those two Churches made to be one were separated, and so separated that had she appeared in Russia in her religious garb she would have been amenable to the laws. The Christian progress her soul had made placed her in her own country under a ban, and stamped her as an alien. . . . Was this just?—was it logical? No; but such was the fact, and if by shedding her blood Sister Natalie could have made it otherwise—we are not speaking at random when we assert that—she would gladly have done so to the last drop. When Father Schouwaloff, her countryman, and like herself a convert to the Catholic Faith and a member of a Religious Order, gave a definite form to this desire; when an association of prayer was formed to second his efforts, and that he invited every Catholic heart to join in it—not one of them responded with more ardor to this appeal than Sister Natalie. This intense desire to propagate the truth, natural to all converts, is more peculiarly strong in those from the Greek Church. The idea of seeing the fatal barrier which separates the Eastern from the Western Church disappear; the hope of hearing them both called by the single appellation of *the Church*—these are thoughts which inspire the heart of every Russian Catholic with an ardor of desire which it is difficult for others to understand.

Nothing more illogical and contradictory can be conceived than the attempts of union sometimes talked of in these days between the Greek Church and Protestant Churches and sects. Even before her conversion Sister Natalie's clear intellect perceived the impossibility of such an alliance. The simplest power of reflection would seem sufficient to show that the Greek Church, if it united itself with the Catholic Church, would preserve unbroken the traditions of her venerable antiquity as well as the dogmas she holds; and that, ceasing to be local, she would recover that power of expansion and evangelization which she has so entirely lost from the time that schism paralyzed and isolated her. In that case she could be compared to a Princess of high birth who resumes her position in a Royal family from which she had been long separated. But to ally herself with Protestantism would be indeed the worst of *mésalliances*—the wilful abdication of all the rights derived from a long line of illustrious ancestors.

After Sister Natalie emerged from the obscurity of the Secretary's office at the Rue du Bac, and was more known to the public, it was not only her countrymen and her old friends who sought her out, but a number of persons—strangers to her up to that time—who, attracted by the charm of sanctity combined with natural gifts, came to ask her for advice and consolation amidst the various sufferings of life. The multitude of these visitors would have been very oppressive if she had not possessed the talent of shortening useless conversations, and devoting all the leisure she could spare from her daily duties to those who repaired to her under the pressure of real sorrows and difficulties. In the most polite and amiable manner possible she knew how to keep at a distance, without offending them, those who had no such claim on her time.

A woman of the world once said, "I am very fond of that young Superior, and only to look at her does me good; but I never go and see her without necessity, for I feel she is an interior person who does not like to lose her time in conversation."

An interior person ! Oh, yes; our dear Sister Natalie, in spite of the multiplicity of her external duties, did indeed lead an interior life; the spirit of Martha and that of Mary were never more blended in one person than in her who from her earliest youth had felt this double attraction. The very sound of her voice added to the effect of the words she uttered, and imprinted them in the mind with a strange power,—they seemed like the echo of that Divine interior voice in her soul. One day that I was sitting with her in the little room I have already described, enjoying a conversation which combined the charm of an intimate friendship with the useful effect of something approaching to a confession, she made an answer to one of my observations which I have never forgotten. Speaking in a foolish manner, but common enough to those who are mere beginners in the spiritual life, I said, "It is not very difficult to detach one's self from earth, but what is awful is the thought of even a happy eternity,—of something unknown." She looked surprised, and clasping her hands together exclaimed, "Oh ! is it possible that you can call Heaven something unknown ?"

The way in which she said those words was in itself a sermon, or rather a revelation, for they made me feel a blessed consciousness of nearness to a soul which had soared so much higher than my own into the region of truth and light. We cannot repeat it too often—even if we have not the strength to scale the heights of perfection ourselves, it is good and useful to listen to those who dwell on those summits.

Sister Natalie, whose hand was so light and so dextrous in dressing the wounds of the poor and ministering to sufferers in their sick-beds, had also a singular gift for soothing aching hearts and healing their woes. We cannot number the friends she made during that last period of her life, the temporal sufferings which her wise and practical spirit enabled her to relieve, the moral trials of every sort which her penetration knew how to discern. No kind of misery escaped her pitying care, even those which the world does not compassionate. We are not alluding to those sad falls which it brings about with such deceitful snares and afterwards condemns with such relentless cruelty; we mean those sorrows which proceed from infirmity of character, and which draw forth the remark, "So much the worse if such persons suffer; it is their own fault if they choose to be unhappy;" or, "Others in their position would consider themselves fortunate;" or again, "They are a torment to themselves and everybody else:"—and all those kind of observations which are intended to absolve those who utter them from the troublesome necessity of pitying those to whom they refer. Very different was the holy charity of the heart so closely united to the Sacred Heart—the only perfect and Divine furnace of boundless love. We cannot indeed number those who looked up to Sister Natalie with the tenderness children feel for a mother, and the trust which sanctity inspires.

There is, however, one amongst her friends whom we must mention, for she had a very particular share in Sister Natalie's affectionate solicitude. The Countess of — had been very intimate with Marie de Bombelles; and when the latter withdrew within the walls of the Visitation, her grief was so great that a judicious friend confided to Natalie's tender heart the task of comforting and supporting her. This proved one of those blessings

which those alone can understand to whom God has sent in the hour of their utmost need an arm to support them, a voice to encourage, and a heart to love them. No wonder that these blessings were reciprocated with grateful affection. The Comtesse de N——, who did not live in France, used to make at stated periods a long journey in order to visit her whom she called the benefactress of her soul. She used to bring her children to Sister Natalie, who kept them whole days with her own little flock. Their mother lodged close to the convent, in order to spend as much time as possible in the little parlor of the Rue St. Guillaume. The immense and luxurious city of Paris was comprised for her in that humble little house in a neglected corner of the Faubourg St. Germain, far from the eyes of the aristocratic world of that fashionable locality, and all but unknown to the inhabitants of the other bank of the Loire.

Long absences intervened between these short meetings, but Sister Natalie's letters supplied the void of actual separation. In the midst of the daily occupations we have enumerated she found means to perpetuate salutary influences by a regular correspondence. Time as well as money multiplies in the hands of those who know how to employ them, and Natalie could always command both when there was question of showing sympathy or of distributing alms.

CHAPTER XVIII.

1865.



IF we have found it difficult to describe the details of Sister Natalie's active life, and still more all her friendly and charitable intercourse with others, what will it be if we now attempt to fathom the depths of her soul, and penetrate the mainsprings of all her virtuous actions? We should not have ventured on a task so much beyond our ability, and for which we might justly be deemed incompetent, had we not been enabled to adduce testimony of incontestable weight and importance.

She used to say herself, "To love Jesus Christ, to possess Him, to adore Him, to rest on His Sacred Heart, is heaven on earth, and all this we can do at the foot of the Tabernacle. But it is still too imperfect; I want heaven with its light, and to be never separated from the Heart of Jesus."

These few lines tell us what she possessed and what she longed for. They sum up all that we could learn on so delicate and intimate a subject from those whose mission it was to follow and to second her in its last and most perfect development.

From the outset of her life Natalie had always been humble and sincere. But in proportion as her horror of the least imperfection increased, she became more and more severe towards herself; and if in the sunlight of her soul she discovered the least particle of earthly dross, it became an imperative need and an inexpressible relief to accuse herself, to humble herself, and to manifest the most secret recesses of her conscience. "The

bare idea that the least atom in the pure heaven of her soul might escape the eyes of her spiritual guide was a strange suffering to her." Such were the words of one of those most familiar with Natalie's hidden life—of one who confirmed all we have said of her natural tendencies to perfection and the fidelity with which she abandoned herself to the influences of grace,—and who has made known to us more than anybody else the greatness of her soul, the generosity of her character, and its firm energy,—qualities which, in hearts closely united to God, do not deteriorate from their simplicity or their humility.

Natalie showed in every way this generous-heartedness. Nothing could, indeed, exceed the strict economy she practised, the perfect order of everything about her, or the austere poverty which her example inculcated; still she liked to spend generously, and almost lavishly, the alms which those who had full confidence in her left in her hands. Far and wide did her bounty extend, not only with regard to her dear missions, but all the wants of the Church. She seemed to stand aloft, if we may use that expression, and to look far beyond her immediate circle for the objects of her charity. She was, as we have seen, prodigal of her affection as well as of her alms; but if such was the case towards those to whom she was united on earth by the ties of sympathy, compassion, and charity, what shall we say of her love of Him whom she loved with a love exceeding all earthly affection?—for Him for whom, the same witness tells us, she yearned with all the most intense longings of her soul—Him who was the supreme and blessed end of her desires—the ocean of all beauty, goodness, love, and wisdom, in whose immensity she would fain have plunged and assuaged the burning thirst of her soul. This desire often amounted to a keen suffering; and she might truly have applied to herself the words of St. Au-

gustine, "Irrequietum est cor meum, Domine, donec requiescat in te." *

The gift of unitive prayer, with which God often favors those souls who desire to devote themselves wholly to Him, had been amply bestowed on Sister Natalie. She could remain for hours without fatigue kneeling before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and it was only by a strong effort she could tear herself away. Her spiritual guide had to interfere on that point with her devotion, and warn her of the danger of forgetting the lapse of time in that Sanctuary where she often and so fervently offered herself as a victim to disarm the wrath of God, and to obtain for others the grace to know and love Him.

Instead of finding a difficulty like most other people to place herself in the presence of God, and to banish the thoughts of external things, Sister Natalie was constrained to make efforts to resist the attraction which forced her, as it were, towards the Tabernacle, where she adored her God really present.

But after being placed on her guard against yielding to the temptation of prolonging her prayer, to the neglect of other duties, she never gave way to it again. It was observed that, on the contrary, however absorbed she was in contemplation, the moment any one called her she rose and left the chapel. Once only, in the case of a visit which she knew to be unimportant, Sister Natalie sent word that she was engaged. She afterwards reproached herself for that answer, fearing that she had failed in charity.

But when there was no obstacle to her remaining before the Altar, she was wont to abide there in a state of

* St. Augustine's Confessions, Bk. I., ch. 1.

such deep recollection, that she neither saw nor heard anything that went on about her. A person who went one day into the chapel to speak to Sister Natalie, relates that as she opened the door she saw her kneeling without support in the middle of the little oratory, with her eyes fixed on the Tabernacle. Her countenance expressed the deepest peace and serenity. She seemed to be gazing on her God through the visible veils which concealed Him from her. The visitor did not venture to advance, afraid of interrupting that holy soul's intercourse with our Blessed Lord, and remained for a long time standing at the door, fascinated and riveted by that wonderful sight.

It would indeed have been a pity if Natalie had not readily complied with the summons of those who interrupted her prayers, for when she had been spending some time—as she expressed it—near that sacred fire, there was something so holy about her appearance that it seemed to impart to those who saw her a knowledge and an appreciation of true goodness. It was this we are told by a venerable missionary priest, who often had conversed with her, which made it so profitable to the soul to be in communication with Sister Narischkin. It was impossible not to feel one's self growing better whilst conversing with her; her soul was so full of the love of God that it emitted the odor of sanctity St. Paul speaks of. Wherever she went she carried with her the presence of Jesus Christ, and communicated to others that holy and sacred impression.

It is easy to understand that the result of so intense a love of God was an ardent desire to leave this world, and so keen a longing for heaven that it sometimes deprived her of *the patience to live*. The same person adds, "I have never seen in any one to such a high degree the

feeling of St. Paul, 'Unhappy that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' " *

The wise director of her conscience thought that she sometimes carried this desire to an inordinate degree, and reminded her of St. Martin's words on the threshold of his eternal home, "Non recuso laborem." This ardent longing for death did not proceed in Natalie from the wish to be delivered from the sufferings of life. She expressed and felt the greatest indifference as to what her body might have to suffer, and the sequel proved that these words were not in her mouth vain expressions. Detachment from the world and a desire for heaven were, on her part, acts of pure and perfect love of God, and proceeded from the wish to love Him still more perfectly. They were another instance of the feeling known only to Saints, and which has made them exclaim, "I die of not being able to die;" and fills them in the midst of their sufferings with a mysterious joy so overpowering, that it forces them to cry out, "Enough, enough, my God!"

We have shown how much good Natalie did to others. We will now say a few words of the good that others did to her. The Jesuits she always looked upon as her first Fathers. Father Aladel had guided her steps in the path of the Saints. We know what Father Etienne thought of her whom he called "a pearl," and of his happy influence over her. We should have liked to name those who were her last directors, and particularly Father Chinchon, who led her to the very summit of perfection, and for whom she had an extraordinary reverence. But we have not time to speak of all these friends of her soul, and must limit ourselves to a brief mention of those whom a providential inspiration attracted to the little

* Rom. vii. 24.

convent which they frequented for a while, receiving, and in return giving, singular edification.

Amongst these pious visitors we find Father Hermann, whose conversion had so very much touched Sister Natalie. She was never tired of perusing the affecting account he wrote of the wonderful grace vouchsafed to him. We have seen with what joy she welcomed the appearance of this holy religious at the Mother-house, where he came to say Mass one day whilst she was there.

In 1862 he spent a fortnight in Paris, and every day during that time he said Mass in the little chapel of the Convent in the Rue St. Guillaume. A direct and intimate communication then began between two souls well-fitted to understand each other. But nothing we could say will describe this as well as the following letter from Sister Natalie to her sister Catherine:

“How can I thank you enough for your generous gift? It is in your name that I shall assist the good works your charity enables me to promote. I, who am poor, can only send you in return a picture; but the name written on that picture, dear Kate, is that of a Saint. Only fancy, for a fortnight we have had every day Father Hermann here. You have heard of his conversion in 1847, but if you only knew how strongly and continually grace works in his soul, you would join us in thanking God for it. My dear companions are electrified and penetrated by the perfume of his virtues. This good Father is so fond of our house. He says he finds in it the simplicity of St. Teresa’s children. He said Mass for us almost every day, and the children sing his hymns to the Blessed Sacrament with great devotion, which quite delighted him. Yesterday, after writing his name on the little picture I send you, he said, ‘Really I have no merit in coming to this house. I feel that Jesus is everywhere in it; in the Blessed Sacrament, in the chapel, in your

hearts, in this room, on the stairs, everywhere—in short, I feel that this dear house is impregnated with Jesus and His love.’ Our sisters are overflowing with love and gratitude. Do, dear Kate, thank God for all the mercies He vouchsafes to us. This Father’s presence has done us great good. One cannot help being the better for coming into contact with his ardent charity. The impressions he leaves behind him are quite peculiar.”

Father Hermann felt about Sister Natalie very much as she did with regard to him. He said that in his opinion “she was one of the most beautiful souls in the Church.”

Another priest who was capable of appreciating Natalie, who saw her often, and afforded her the support and consolation of his holy friendship, spoke of her as follows: “Sister Natalie,” the Abbé de Girardin says, “is one of those nuns whose life is hid in God with Jesus Christ—a perfect type of the Christian virgins who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goes. Her head was generally slightly bowed, her eyes modestly bent down. She had no need to make acts of recollection—God was in her face and in her heart. . . . Her life was a perpetual sermon; and looking at her one understood what St. Francis of Assisi meant when one day he said to one of his monks, ‘Let us go out and preach,’ and then walked with him through the town in complete silence. They preached by their countenance and example. How often Sister Natalie preached in that way.”

In the year 1865, Natalie, by Father Etienne’s desire, made another journey out of France. He was going to found a house of Sisters at Gratz, and he took her with him, partly to have her assistance in the work he had in hand, and partly to give the benefit of change of air to her precious and now rapidly-failing health.

During her stay at Gratz she had the happiness of see-

ing her own two sisters, who came from Trieste to spend some days with her. This happiness, and the spiritual joy she felt in the midst of the new foundation, rendered her sojourn at Gratz as delightful as Father Etienne had hoped. Her daily intercourse with this holy Superior of St. Vincent of Paul was an additional grace which made this journey into a pilgrimage full of blessings to her soul, though her health reaped but little advantage from it.

On leaving Gratz, Father Etienne went to Vienna, and there another great and deep joy awaited his travelling companion. She saw there the dear friend who after parting with her had retired to a cloistered convent at so great a distance from her. Natalie's apparition before the grate behind which she found Marie de Bombelles, deeply touched them both. "I was so agitated," Marie said, "with joy and gratitude, that I could hardly speak, and Natalie's answer to my speechless emotion was her beautiful smile. I thought she looked ill, but when I spoke of my anxiety about her, she said. "Oh, let us leave alone that miserable body; we are going to heaven!"

The change in Natalie was indeed but too evident. As we read her letters, which we shall continue to quote till the end of our narrative, we shall see her from this time forward struggling against the malady which was undermining her life, and becoming every day more painful and distressing. But no complaint ever escaped her lips. Nothing disturbed her thoughts from their habitual course. Suffering seemed to act on her like fire on incense. The sweet beauty of her soul increased under it, and spread around her an atmosphere of holiness. She loved more intensely than ever her poor children, her sisters, her friends, her country,—and God above all and more than all.

We should extend our work too much if we tran-

scribed all the letters written by Sister Natalie during her absence from home. The anxieties of a mother are but a faint image of the care and tenderness which she shows and expresses in this correspondence with regard to all the members of her numerous family. As soon, however, as she found herself once more in the midst of her Sisters, she thought of leaving them again, and perhaps forever.

The cholera had burst out at St. Petersburg. The news of its ravages touched a tender chord in Natalie's heart, and she conceived an ardent desire to go and share the dangers of her country people, and to devote herself to the care of the sick in the numerous hospitals hastily organized for their reception. It was on very rare occasions that she expressed any wish of her own, but in this case she asked and obtained leave of her Superiors to act on this impulse. Then, forgetting her bodily weakness, and alas! forgetting also how closed against her were those hearts which she still so faithfully loved, the Russian Sister of Charity ventured to write to the Empress, who was at that time at Nice, and for a few days flattered herself with the hope that her request would be granted, and that she would be permitted to return to her native land to nurse her own people, and die in the midst of them.

But the rarest generosity in the world is that which accepts a sacrifice, and it was not evinced in this instance. The poor Sister's simple and touching letter remained unanswered for three months, and then Count Pierre Schouwaloff wrote civilly but coldly that the epidemic had ceased, and there was no occasion for her services. Not a word of thanks accompanied this reply, the omission of which did not strike Sister Natalie; but she could not but feel the coldness of the reply, and more ardently than ever pined for the day when the icy wall of separa-

tion would disappear which divided her, as if she had been guilty of a crime, from those she so earnestly loved.

But in all exterior circumstances she always saw God's will alone, so that these regrets were unaccompanied by depression or discontent. She quietly resumed with unimproved health, and suffering which had become continual, the community life interrupted by her journey. She felt her weakness without complaining of it, and was courageous about everything save the sufferings of her daughters, whom she would have fain relieved from their pains even while she taught them how to bear them, and envied those who died.

Amongst these was one of those creatures whom one cannot help admiring and regretting, like a beautiful vision about to vanish from the earth. Natalie had felt a great sympathy for this young girl ever since she had seen her for the first time and fetched her away from the Mother-house. Her name was Laura. Sister Natalie said to her, "My dear child, will you keep that name in the community? For my part I like it, and would be glad to have a Sister so called in our house." Laura answered, "My name was one of the things I had resolved to sacrifice to God." "Well then," Natalie replied, "Shall we call you *Agnes*?" The young girl blushed with surprise and pleasure, and thanking her for the choice of that name, said that from her childhood she had always had a peculiar affection for that dear little Saint. And worthily did she bear that sweet appellation;—this young Sister who seemed only just to have appeared amidst her companions to edify them by her holiness, her sufferings, and early death. Like so many others, this pure victim had offered herself up for the salvation of those she loved. But if the sufferings she had asked for were not denied, joy was also bestowed upon her, and that in no ordinary degree.

"Oh! if people only knew," she said in her last moments, "the happiness it is to die a Sister of Charity!" Natalie found her on her return in a hopeless state. "I envy my Sister Agnes," she wrote, "for I think that she must be pleasing to God; I should like to be as sure of being so myself, and then to die as rapidly. It is sad to grow old on earth when heaven is so beautiful!"

The end was approaching, and the poor Superior had to write to the sister of the dying nun what could no longer be concealed.

"1865. I am commissioned by your little Agnes to tell you secretly that she is getting very weak and cannot last long. She wants you, her sister, to know it, but does not wish you to alarm yet the rest of her family. She sends you a little image of St. Joseph; and is holding in her hand one of your patron Saint,—the Blessed Margaret Mary. This picture is like herself, it has the same expression of suffering. This likeness seems to please her, and as she looked at it she tried to smile. Poor dear lamb! It seems to please our Lord to lead her more and more into a state of complete annihilation. I said nothing about your little invalid; I thought it more prudent not to disturb her perfect peace and calm. She thinks of earthly things only just as much as is necessary. When she speaks of you it is just with a few brief words. It is indeed well that this young flower takes to heaven all its sweet perfume. Our dear Sisters often visit her. She has always a word or a smile for them. Jesus wants and calls her. My very dear M——, should we venture to keep her back if we could?—we who look to the same joys, who await the same happiness?"

A few days later she added, "our dear Sister Agnes yielded her soul to God yesterday evening, after a short and peaceful agony. The expression of her face was that of a little Saint."

The appearance and the disappearance of this little angel was a sweet though solemn event for Natalie and her Sisters. On the one hand, there was sacrifice, suffering, abnegation, and a young life cut short in its spring-tide; on the other, a prayer answered, a soul saved, an infinite happiness secured after a brief struggle. For those who thought as Natalie did of such events there was more to rejoice than to grieve at in such a death; and it was not wonderful to hear her often exclaim, "I envy my sister Agnes."

A touching circumstance is related in connection with a little cross—a souvenir and a relic of this angelic young Sister. She had brought it back from Clamart, where she had been sent for her health, with the intention of giving it to her dear Superior. It was made of the wood of St. Vincent of Paul's oak tree, and was set in silver. When Sister Natalie saw it she said, "Oh, why did you buy it for me?—you know we do not wear silver." Poor Sister Agnes, a little disappointed, said, "But if his Daughters are not to have it, who shall possess this wood from St. Vincent's tree?" Natalie smiled and said, "Well, I accept it, but to give it away." "To one of our Sisters?" Agnes asked pleased at any rate that her present was not refused. "No, but to your sister as a remembrance both of you and of me."

This precious cross has of course been preserved with love and reverence by those in whose hands it has remained. And it will be no matter of surprise that many a prayer answered, and many a grace vouchsafed, should be connected with it.

We must say a few words more on Natalie's great charity, not only towards missionaries—which she looked upon as her special vocation—but also towards priests in general. She had an intense desire to see noble hearts and devoted souls dedicating their lives to the sacred

ministry. It was through their hands that graces were to flow all over the world by means of the Sacraments, and she spared no efforts to remove the exterior obstacles which sometimes stood in the way of their entrance into the Sanctuary. So many are the instances of her zeal in this respect that we cannot relate them all, and must content ourselves with the following account of an occurrence which proved the means of giving to the Church a pious and zealous priest:

Once, when Natalie was in one of the provinces for a foundation, she went to a neighboring village to visit the good Superior of one of St. Vincent of Paul's houses. She heard there of a young man, who after finishing his studies had been obliged by inevitable circumstances to become a farm-servant, though his ardent desire had been to enter the great seminary. Instantly the thought occurred to her of withdrawing from the world a soul on which God seemed to have a special claim. She sought, and soon found, an opportunity of speaking to this young man. On her return to Paris, the following day, it so happened that he drove the carriage which was to take her to the station. On arriving there, she thanked him and said, "Sir, forgive me if I am guilty of an indiscretion; but I have been told that you once wished to be a priest. Have you still the same desire? Should you like to enter the great seminary?" "Sister, your question touches me very much," the young man answered; "my wishes are always the same, I long intensely to be a priest; I see no other way to peace and happiness in this world and in the next; but insurmountable obstacles daily increase. I look upon this wish as a temptation, and I try to drive it away, but in this conflict between my wishes and my fears I can find no rest." "Thank you for those few words," Sister Natalie answered; "I am sorry there is not time for us to converse more at

length, for here is the train and I must go. Accept this little picture. Put your trust in God and take courage, and then when you go home promise to write to me a line."

Thanks to Sister Natalie's persevering efforts, all material obstacles were removed. Two years afterwards this young man, after a fervent preparation, entered the great seminary. She had used the most unremitting efforts to this end.

Many similar examples might be quoted of what I am inclined to call Sister Natalie's grand zeal for souls. Without exaggeration, eagerness, or any imprudence, she was always on the look-out for opportunities of assisting others in their spiritual needs, and never allowed a single one to escape her. Her ardent love of God seemed to enlarge her mind as well as to widen her heart.

CHAPTER XIX.



THE only event which from that time until 1870 disturbed Sister Natalie's outward peace, was the death of M. Anatole Demidoff, which happened in Paris, on the 15th of May of that terrible year. She had probably hoped from his great goodness to the poor, and his admiration for a perfect life even under a form which generally excites hostility in those not familiar with it, that he would end by becoming, in a striking and complete manner, a convert to truth and virtue, like so many illustrious persons in other ages and even in our own.

But this was not the case. Natalie was suffered to approach her uncle in his last illness, and they conversed together a great deal. We cannot tell what passed between them. We only know that during all the remainder of her life she always spoke of him with affectionate gratitude, and regrets mingled with much hope. As a Saint has said, "There are depths of mercy between the last sigh of a dying person and God's judgment of the departed soul." May we not feel great consolation when in the scale are thrown the tears and blessings of the poor, the prayers and offerings of holy souls?

During a few months Natalie's illness did not perceptibly increase, and that being the case she was apt to forget its existence and its dangers. It was impossible to induce her to spare her strength—the children, the poor, the sick, claimed her at every moment, and she never refused to attend to them. The most wretched were those who most attracted her, and in return they showed her a demonstrative affection which would not have been agreeable to people in general. One poor rag-picker, amongst

others, made it a point always to embrace her on New Year's Day and on her Feast, which Natalie submitted to in the most gracious manner possible, and did not at all admit that because she was dirty the poor woman was not to kiss her.

She never could make up her mind to send away the children too young to go to school. She used to take charge of them herself. Two of these little creatures were wont to remain whole days by their dear Sister Superior, and were often lying asleep in her room when people came to see her. She watched over them with the care and patience of a mother, and kept them with her till they were old enough to go into the Orphanage.

The time was gone by when her clumsiness in handling a broom made her unhappy, and amused her Sisters. Just as she excelled in the management of an establishment where there were many people to look after, and very little room, so had she become used to the commonest and roughest work of the house. She took her turn with the others in the business of the kitchen and the laundry, and perhaps the nearest approach to imperfection which was ever detected in Sister Narischkin was her excessive reluctance to give up these fatiguing occupations which taxed her strength too much, long before she would admit it. The Sisters did their best to spare her these labors, but it was difficult to do so consistently with obedience, and even when Sister Natalie had promised to attend to their suggestions on that point, she often found some means or other to have her own way.

Sometimes after a sleepless night spent in coughing the Sisters persuaded her to rest a little, and not to go to the place where she saw and conversed with poor people. But they knew the way to her room, and used to go there straight and to exclaim, "Oh, good Mother, what a joy it is to find you!" Far from sending them away, "Come

in, come in," she used to say, "but hide yourselves that the Sisters may not see you." The wish to speak to her was so great that her companions used to try, when they walked with her in the streets, to keep her out of sight, for the moment she was recognized Sister Narischkin was instantly surrounded.

Once when her strength failed her she exclaimed, "Oh, be very self-devoted whilst you are young and healthy!" and then added, "Now that I am ill, always suffering, and of no use, I should be very unhappy but for the consciousness that I did my best as long as I could." One of her companions then ventured to ask her if in former days she had been allowed to perform severe penances. "Oh, yes!" she answered simply, "everything I wished for and asked—fasts, hair-cloths, and other instruments of penance." She paused a little, and then said, "I cannot tell you what a consolation it was to me to do those sort of things for our Lord. I spent such happy nights. Now I can do nothing," she added sadly; "but then there is obedience, which supplies for everything else."

Soon after her return, she wrote to her Sister Elisabeth: "Do not those days at our little convent seem to you like a dream? How quickly they elapsed, and how distant they now appear—those rapid moments we spent together. I followed you, in thought, all Friday; but now that you are at Trieste, I don't know where to look for you. I need not tell you how delighted our Sisters were at my return! My only regret was to leave our good Father. The very sight of him gives me the greatest wish to practise every sort of virtue."

TO THE VISCOUNTESS DES CARS.

"The cholera has reappeared at Paris. It pursues its course and there are a great number of deaths. Pray

for all the souls which have so suddenly to appear before the judgment-seat of God. If you hear that I am carried away this time, you will I am sure have Masses said for the repose of my poor soul; and you will ask Father Hermann to say Mass for me. Our Lazarist Fathers are all beginning their retreat to-night, so it would not be the moment to choose for leaving this world. But as to that, too, it is better to leave the choice to God. I am sure that you agree with me in that. Oh, yes, always, in everything—without *ifs* and without *buts*—let us unite ourselves in will, in heart, and in mind with Him who is everything and all in all to us !”

After the Emperor of Russia's visit to Paris, in 1867, she wrote to her sisters:

“ July 14th, 1867.

“ I am told that well-bred and distinguished people were pleased with the Emperor, and still more with his second son—the Grand Duke Wladimir.

“ On the day after the horrible attempt,* we were ordered to illuminate, like all the other establishments connected with the city of Paris. I felt very keenly, on the occasion of this traitorous attempt, those emotions which people say belong to noble-hearted souls.” †

“ 1868.

“ Pray for us on Saturday. It is the great day of the renovation of our vows—those vows which add, each year, a link to the chain which binds us to Jesus. In Passion week I hope, please God, to gain my jubilee, and then will come that other great week so full of increasing emotions that the heart seems unable to contain them.

* Berezowsky's attempt to assassinate the Emperor of Russia.

† A famous French poet says, “ A tous les cœurs bien nés, que la Patrie est chère !”

"You gave me so much pleasure, dear Kate, by telling me the good that 'A Sister's Story' has done to your soul! Pauline also rejoiced to hear it. She came to see me, and we had a long chat together. She has a noble soul, but unfortunately she is over-anxious about events ordained by God's Providence. I should like to see her deeply peaceful!

"Do pray much for our uncle Alexis; he has been much in my mind during all these last days without my knowing why. Now I understand it—as he was needing our prayers. Oh! what a consolation there is in prayer!—of what wonderful efficacy it is in all our temporal and spiritual necessities! . . .

"I am sure, dear Kate, that you do not forget St. Joseph during this month of March. Pray to him a great deal. He obtains for us what we ask if we beg for it with confidence and fervor; but above all things animate your heart to a great love of Jesus. O Jesus!—life, light, joy, and peace of our souls!—Jesus, our everlasting love! Pray to Him for me, as I always do for you!

"Have you heard of the death of Louise Esterhazy, which happened at Vienna last Saturday? Oh, poor dear Louise!—she would, perhaps, have liked to live on; and I, on the contrary, feel jealous when I see the friends of my childhood taking their departure; I really do not see if I go on as I am, when I shall ever go!

"I am grieved at a sentence in your letter which shows — to be so little disinterested. Oh, Kate! what ugly things there are on earth. You are right to say that the only thing to be done is to lift up our eyes to heaven. Let us often do so. There everything is beautiful, encouraging, Divine! Jesus from the midst of His eternal glory calls us to share His bliss, and lavishes upon us His grace for that end. It is, in itself, a priceless gift, and the beginning of the eternal glory He means us to

enjoy. Oh, my God!—what good the thought of these great truths does to my soul! I can then rest on Thee with security for my eternal future! Strike as Thou wilt, O Lord, Thou art my Father, infinitely desirous of my happiness. Only make me love Thee, and then do with me what Thou wilt. . . .

“Our good Father Hermann will arrive on Monday. We shall not long enjoy his presence, but it always does one good to see him, for his fervor is constantly increasing. Oh! how sweet it is to love Jesus Christ as the Saints loved Him, and as a multitude of souls love Him even now! This love is such an active and powerful fire that any one filled with it must inevitably communicate its warmth to those around them. I am delighted at the thought of seeing again this fervent religious, if I could only profit a little by his visit!

“Since my dear retreat, instead of being sent to some village in the suburbs to breathe country air, it has been the will of our good God to confine me to my bed, and I see no one. Oh, how delightful it is to abandon one’s self to the good pleasure of that merciful Master, in health as in sickness! Everything becomes sweet—too sweet—in His service; and for my part I cannot find that I have the shadow of a wish but that of loving Him, and increasing every day in that love.

“This is also my heart’s desire for you, dear Kate. Oh, how I long for the love of Jesus to take possession of your soul and transform your life! . . .

“Pauline is gone to St. Mars, where they are expecting the remains of her poor brother Fernand. She had never been to that château where Fernand was looking forward to her visit when all the reparations would have been completed; now it is under the present painful circumstances that our Lord has ordained she should go there for the first time. She really seems to be left in

this world only to close the eyes of her relatives and mourn over their loss. How all this leads us to the thought of eternity, dear Kate! Yet a little while and our turn will come—sooner, perhaps, than we imagine. For my part, I own that I think of nothing else; I think it does one so much good. It lifts up the heart, and gives the soul such good and fervent desires—for, after all, we shall reap only what we have sown. I send you an emblem which I want you to meditate upon. It reminds one of the happy state of a heart that has died to all things—even itself. It is from this annihilation that a true life springs up, and we must work courageously to obtain it.”

We have often met with such words as these elsewhere. They are familiar to the Saints. But good and useful as they are when we read them in their writings, or by hearsay, the impression they make upon us is different when they are connected with personal recollections. It is these recollections, so vividly present in our minds, which give a value in our eyes to each word we transcribe; and if we have at all succeeded in reproducing before our readers the same image, they will, to some degree at least, share our feelings.

We have now arrived at a period when extraordinary and unforeseen events called forth all the energy which our Natalie had gained from constant prayer and union with God. All her remaining strength was about to be spent in a last and courageous effort.

Singularly enough, it was Sister Narischkin who informed her Sister Catherine, then living in a remote part of Austria, of the events that were taking place in Europe, the report of which had not reached her:

“PARIS, July 22nd 1870.

“VERY DEAR KATE,

“I was expecting a letter from you, and I see that you are in complete ignorance of what is going on here. May you be in proportion as conversant with the science of the Saints. The world is in a sad state just now. War is declared between France and Prussia; and in the midst of a little of that enthusiasm which always exists when soldiers are about to defend or avenge their country, there are tears shed in abundance. And you have not heard anything of it in your remote corner of Austria? Is this really possible? You do not know also, I suppose, that the small-pox is raging in Paris? Thanks be to God, and the protection of the Sacred Heart always watching over us, our dear house has been preserved from it, but not this locality. We live in a sort of desert. All the hotels are shut up. For every one this is a time of calamity and trial; and the stifling heat produces every sort of illness. The chastisements of Heaven are weighing heavily on the earth. We must redouble the fervor of our daily prayers, of our penances and mortifications.

“What will be the result of this War? God only knows, but in any case it is not a time for you to think of coming to France; this, dear Sister, will, I know, not weigh lightly in the scale of the sacrifices God asks of you. Try to get a little knowledge of what is going on by reading the newspapers. You isolate yourself too much from the rest of the world. I do not like that isolation—it tends to narrow the heart. Now I must leave you that my letter may go to-day. Pray for France, and pray for us. The most terrible news from China has increased our sorrows to the utmost. Eight of our Sisters and one of the Missionaries have been massacred. They are indeed martyrs; but still one cannot help feeling their deaths,

especially by means of a despatch which leaves one in ignorance of all details."

Six months later she writes:

"PARIS, February 13th, 1871.

"DEAR SISTER,

"You seem to live in another world, by the surprise you express at not having heard from me. Are you not aware that I am in a town just emerging from a state of siege, and where outward communications are still extremely difficult? We are like lepers, whom everybody runs away from and dreads. I can now really feel with truth that I am dead to the world, and the world more than ever dead to me.

"I wonder at your thinking I can convey your messages to this and that person, when I can hardly find out where all those friends are with whom for six months I have had no communication. If it was not for the sufferings, moral and physical, and the anguish every one endured during the siege, I would for my own part bless those days in which our Lord showed so visibly His care of the children of St. Vincent. No disaster befell any of our houses except such as were purely material. But pray for us, for we are not at the end of our troubles. People are suffering very much in health, in consequence of all the privations they have gone through; and now that provisions are coming in prices are exorbitant. Well, may God help us. We kiss the hand that punishes us, for His chastisements are tokens of mercy."

"PARIS, February 14th, 1871.

"The postal communications are very slow. Everybody complains of it. . . . I sometimes wrote by balloons, but I had not much faith in that mode of correspondence, and am not at all surprised that you did not receive my

notes. And then our moral and physical sufferings were so great, that only one want was felt—that of casting ourselves into the Divine Heart of Christ.

“Oh, that happy, happy Father Hermann!* We heard of his death very soon by a letter from Spandau to the Abbé Le Revours. It was on the 28th of January that his beautiful soul took its flight to Heaven. May he obtain for us all a fervent love of Jesus Christ. All is comprised in that. Oh, what a wretched thing life is without that sacred love.”

“March 4th, 1871.

“I have been intending to write to you for several days, but letters suddenly arrived from every part of the world, and we had to send everywhere tokens of our existence. I longed to tell you what we have heard of the last moments of the saintly Father Hermann. One of our Sisters had the privilege of ministering to him during his illness, and witnessing his end. When he felt that he was dying he asked her if she could sing the ‘Te Deum.’ ‘No, she could not.’ ‘And the “Salve Regina”?’ ‘Oh, yes,’ she replied. ‘Then let us sing it together,’ and he began the antiphon with her. As they went on with it, the voice of the dying Saint became weaker and weaker, and then ceased to be heard—he was dead. Oh, what an end, dear sister! If ever I was tempted to the sin of envy, it was from the wish to have been in that privileged Sister’s place!

“I have not seen or heard anything of Mademoiselle — . . . It is indeed sad to be so often deceived. Alas! it shows that there is nothing good, beautiful, and perfect in this world—Jesus only is beauty, goodness, and perfection itself!

* He had died at Spandau, on the 28th of January, of typhus fever caught whilst ministering to the sick soldiers.

"Our poor Paris is still quite deserted. All sorts of diseases are raging, and people say that it will be for a long time very unhealthy. I have not put my foot out of the house since the 5th of September. My cough is most obstinate, and breaks me to pieces; otherwise I am well."

But the terrible days were now at hand, of which we may well say that "had they not been shortened" she would not have survived them. When, on the 13th of February, she had written, "Pray for us, for we are not at the end of our troubles," her previsions had been but too well-founded. During the awful months of the Commune it was not only the sufferings and material danger which exhausted her remaining strength, but more than anything else the heavy responsibility which weighed upon her.

The anguish of so many important resolutions she had to take, her anxiety for those under her care, and in the end her ardent solicitude for those who—denounced and pursued in every direction—took refuge in the humble house which they looked upon as an assured sanctuary—so great was the popular feeling which guarded it. And God permitted that it should indeed prove such a refuge. But with all her strong faith, its Superior acted under these terrible circumstances according to the laws of that wisdom, human and divine, which teaches to rely absolutely on God, and acts nevertheless as if everything depended on personal exertion. During that time, without for one moment losing her calmness, without any agitation of soul or of manner, she evinced the indomitable energy of her character.

On Holy Tuesday, 1871, she wrote:

"An hour ago they came in great haste to tell me that the mob was pillaging St. Thomas's, and that we ought

to shut up the house and hide everything in danger of profanation. Fortunately this has proved a false alarm, but at any moment we may expect these terrible visitors. I hope they will be merciful. The Sacred Heart of our Divine Lord has hitherto protected us in a wonderful manner.

"They have been twice to St. Lazare to look for arms, but otherwise behaved well. At the Val de Grace they visited all the house, from the cellar to the garret, but not the rooms of the Sisters. At other places the mob was furious, and since the fighting has begun they are like madmen. A sort of general terror prevails. If we had not the Divine Heart of our Lord as a shelter, what would become of us? For my own part I feel very peaceful and calm. I do not think anything will happen to us, Jesus is so good.

"Adieu. I send my letter by a good worthy man, who will try to post it at Montlhéry. Our present position is a thousand times worse than during the siege. Pray much for us."

The Sacred Heart!—the Heart of Him who has redeemed us. Is it not a strange thing that these words—the sweetest, the deepest, the most consoling it would seem that human lips can utter—should provoke not only a smile from unbelievers and godless persons, but that many Christians, and even some who call themselves Catholics, do not enter into their meaning, do not feel their beauty? How can this be accounted for? To a certain degree, perhaps, this may be owing to the very imperfect exterior forms this devotion has often assumed—an imperfection partly attributable to the absence, in our days, of high religious art. No Raphael has been found to furnish the world with such a representation of the Divine Heart as he was inspired by faith and

Christian genius to give of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

But, after all, of what importance are outward forms, even were they everything we could conceive and desire? The great, the real, the only thing that signifies, is the thought they typify. The Cross is the Emblem of the Incarnation. It stands before us as the memorial of the great fact that God became Man, and was crucified for us, and it tells us that we must suffer and die for Him. The Heart is the Emblem of love, and it reminds us that Jesus Christ has loved us, and that we too must and can love Him; that the heart He has given us—that heart which throbs within us when it is moved by strong affection—must beat for Him who made it! To show us the Heart of Christ is to set before our eyes the supreme object towards which our own hearts must gravitate.

I am not addressing these words to infidels, to skeptics, to materialists; I am speaking to Christians—that is, to those who believe that Christ has suffered, has ransomed, and has loved mankind. To such I say, “Did He not die? Did He not rise again? Does He not live forever, not only as God but as man? Is not our human nature made Divine through Him?—and what is there in nature, what is there on earth, more noble—we might almost say more Divine—than the heart’s love when the heart is pure?”

What, then, must be the Heart of Him who is the source of all love? Our Saviour said Himself that He had brought fire on earth, and willed it to be kindled. And what is that fire, if not that unchangeable, incomparable love which burns in His Heart, and of which all human affections are more or less faint images, according as that first and supreme love enlightens and inflames them?

This explains, in a few imperfect words, why there are hearts which the very name of "the Heart of Jesus" sets on fire; and such was the case with Sister Natalie. It has been said that the Sacred Heart was her particular devotion. It would be more true to assert that all her devotions, without any exception, arose from that sacred source, and we might add that no real and fervent piety can exist without it. If this is once felt and understood, little attention will be bestowed on the degree of artistic merit in the symbols which represent such an idea; and everything that reminds us of it will be dear to our hearts. This was the case with Natalie. After the Tabernacle nothing in the chapel was as precious to her as the picture which symbolized the love of the Heart of God. But everything there was inexpressibly dear to her, not only as a Holy place, but as the abode of One she tenderly loved. As far as possible she watched herself over each minute detail relating to the Altar, linen, vestments, flowers, and lights, and she maintained everything with the utmost neatness and order. She was also very particular as to her dress and that of her Sister. The least untidiness seemed to her incompatible with the reverence due to the religious habit.

We can imagine her on the day we are speaking of, alone in that chapel, removing every ornament from it, hiding the sacred vessels and the altar candlesticks,—everything that could tempt the rapacity of the mob; even the gilt frames of the pictures. The one of the Sacred Heart she carried into her own room in order to keep it till the last moment. The lamp, too, she left burning in the little Sanctuary; for she could not make up her mind to have the Blessed Sacrament removed until the danger became imminent and made it necessary to preserve it from sacrilege. During the last days of the struggle some one was always watching on the roof of

the house, in order to give timely notice of the approach of the conflagration or the insurgents. Till then she could not bear to leave the Tabernacle empty.

God alone knows what she went through during that melancholy evening in April when she was making these sad preparations. The most fearful rumors reached her, and foreboded the worst; for if the hostages were not yet put to death, they were arrested, and their terrible position kept every one in breathless suspense. It was proposed to increase their number, and horrible threats were uttered which were but too soon realized. Miserable and fatal days!—which seem to belong to some distant phase of history, and which we cannot remember without a shudder—of such recent occurrence too, and yet already half-forgotten by many of us!

Several Lazarist Fathers were amongst the hostages, and, as well as the Jesuits who were arrested at the same time, were only to leave their prison for the scene of their martyrdom. Others were being pursued, and all were in danger. We can easily imagine with what eagerness and self-devotion Sister Natalie received those who successively took refuge in her little convent. During those frightful days she communicated to all around her the peaceful courage which filled her heart. The children had been sent away, to their parents in some cases, or to places of safety out of Paris, but their vacant rooms were filled with persons living in the neighborhood, who thought that the respect inspired by the house of Charity promised a greater security than they could reckon upon in their own homes. Sister Natalie never refused to admit any one, and shared with these guests the slender resources of the house. Sometimes they were in the most urgent need, and reduced to the strangest expedients in order to find bread. Then came the last awful struggle, and all that made it atrocious, bloody and infernal.

The troops had entered Paris, but the still unconquered masters of the town were resisting with a desperate rage which vented itself by bloodshed and fire. The burning of the public monuments and the massacre of the hostages seemed the acts of demons rather than men; and, when maddened with fury and drink—after the commission of such deeds—it was plain that nothing could command respect, and no one hoped for mercy.

At that moment the house of the Rue St. Guillaume, surrounded by three barricades, was virtually in the power of the insurgents. One of the most venerated missionaries of the Lazarist community was lying concealed in it since he had been obliged to fly from his own monastery. Fearing that his presence might prove a danger to the Sisters, he was determined at any price to get away, and whatever the danger, to try and reach one of the gates of the town. But Sister Natalie protested against it, and at last consented to his departure only on one condition, and that was that she should accompany him.

The insurgents, even in the midst of their blind fury, still respected the white cornettes which they saw day and night bending over the beds of the sick and wounded and placing their children in safety. Sister Natalie asked leave to cross one of the barricades in order to go to a station, and the permission was granted. She then succeeded in placing in a carriage her venerated guest, and, with another of her Sisters, got into it herself. The two cornettes showed themselves at the windows of the vehicle, and in midst of the fighting and the flames of the burning houses they made their way to the station, and after witnessing the departure of the priest, came home at the end of many weary hours fraught with danger and anxiety to themselves and to the community which welcomed them back at last in safety.

But by that time the extending conflagration was threatening their own house. It did not, however, occur to Natalie to fly. A sort of supernatural confidence, justified by the event, prevented her from feeling frightened; and indeed the news soon reached them that the fire had been extinguished just as it was reaching the wall close to their abode. This danger at an end, all their attention was absorbed in the immediate duties of the moment. Fighting had begun on the barricades, and the wounded combatants had to be tended. These men were Communists; they were shut up together with them within the barricades. They nursed them as devotedly as if they had been their best friends. One may almost add that they became such; for we are bound to place it on record that during this strange time of communication between the Sisters and the insurgents, neither of the parties had the least complaint to make against the other.

Alas! poor deluded people! Excited by hard, proud men—against those who really love them, belong to them, and suffer with them and for them—their wild madness is more a subject for prayer than for wrath and condemnation.

May the blood of the victims, and their pleadings for their murderers, obtain for the insane, recovery; for the guilty, remorse; and for the next generation all that ours is purchasing at so dear a price—the reign of order—in peace, in concord, and in truth!

CHAPTER XX.

1871.



THE struggle once ended, after a brief moment of stupor France began to breathe again, and the throbbings of her vigorous life to reassume their vitality. So little was it affected by events which for other nations would have proved fatal convulsions, that there is reason to be astonished and grieved at the rapidity with which these awful occurrences seem to pass away from our memories!

But in Sister Natalie's soul they had left traces of most painful emotion. After the dangers which she had met with such dauntless bravery were over, a strong reaction ensued. The bloody pavement of Paris seemed, she said, to burn her feet; the smell of petroleum to poison the air, and to follow her wherever she went; but above all, the sufferings, the crimes, the calamities, the offences against God and man she had witnessed, filled her soul with horror, and incessantly haunted her. For one so overflowing with love of God and charity to her neighbor, this was a real martyrdom. Her overwrought nerves absolutely required rest, and a change of air and scene.

Her Superiors perceived this, and sent her to spend a month at Dax, near the tomb of St. Vincent of Paul. And so far as her nerves went, and her peace of mind, the required result was completely obtained. But as to her physical strength, neither rest nor remedies could ever again restore it, and it was only her indomitable energy that prolonged a struggle the end of which was evidently neither uncertain nor distant.

From the time of her return she almost continually

had to keep her bed. The fluctuations in her state occasionally brought with them a few days of comparative ease, which she instantly took advantage of to resume her community life. It was only quite at last, and when completely prostrated by illness, that she was induced to give up entirely the exterior and active duties of her post. As to other obligations, she never omitted them. To the very end she went on occupying herself with the spiritual and material direction of the community intrusted to her, and it was only on the eve of her death that she ceased to watch over the administration of the house.

The shortness of her letters shows us how such efforts must have taxed her energy. We find in them evidence of increasing suffering, increasing weakness, and ever-increasing fervor. She wrote on the 23d of February, 1873, to the Viscountess Des Cars, who had just lost her mother:

"I deeply sympathize with your grief. You can rely upon my poor prayers and those of my Sisters for that dear soul—dear to us on so many accounts. . . . You are coming out of retreat, your heart well prepared for so great a sacrifice. And then Jesus, your beloved Lord, is there to strengthen you. Oh, blessed are the hearts which belong to God!"

Some days afterwards she adds:

"Oh, all that you tell me is very true and very consoling! What a difference between what we see and we look forward to! What a delightful surprise for the soul! What overwhelming joy!"

But according to her own desires she seemed to be too slowly drawing near the end. In a letter dated April 28th, 1873, which she could not finish, we find these words:

"I must leave off. I am spitting blood again, and my

cough is most obstinate. Still I dare not hope to go soon to heaven. Let it be when our Lord wills it. For one moment I flattered myself that the hour was come, but the hope proved fallacious."

This time she was mistaken. That blood-spitting was indeed the signal of the instant so ardently longed for. Soon Natalie perceived it by the increasing and absolute debility which was to be the last phase of her long suffering. Not to be able to speak or move without a great effort was no longer to live, and yet it was not death. This was her greatest trial, but like all others she endured it peacefully. Her poor companions understood that this sudden prostration of powers which had hitherto maintained themselves amidst the severest attacks of her illness, were a token of the approaching end, and could not conceal from her their affliction. "Do not make yourselves so unhappy," she said to them. "After all, I cannot stay forever with you. I really must go to heaven, and you will follow me."

Patience, submission, perfect resignation to God's will, give the strength to endure suffering, but they do not deliver us from it. On the contrary, these virtues are called into action by the most acute pains. Natalie not only had to bear a prostrating exhaustion, but also a severe cough, with frequent blood-spittings, paroxysms of suffocation, and a complete loss of sleep and appetite.

She did not disguise her ailments. She accepted remedies, thanked those who watched over her, and became every day more gentle, more calm, more serene. She begged her Sisters not to pray for her recovery, but for the grace of a perfect patience. One of them said that she was going to ask our Lord to relieve her dear Mother from her sufferings, and to give them to herself instead. Natalie smiled, and answered:

"And do you really think I would make them over to

you? You are quite mistaken; I am not so generous as that."

Once when she was struggling in one of her violent fits of coughing, which seemed to tear her to pieces, some one said, "Oh, that dreadful cough!" "No," Natalie replied, "do not call it dreadful; I have bargained with our Lord that each fit of coughing will stand for an act of love."

When her Sisters said, as they took leave of her for the night, that they hoped it would be a good one, she replied, "It will be as God chooses;" or else, "I hope it will be a good one in His sight. May the will of God be done; I will all He wills—to lie awake or to sleep, to suffer or to get well, to live or to die, comes to the same for me; I will not, I cannot, now ask for one thing rather than another."

Such were the words which escaped her lips whilst under the pressure of suffering. During her sleepless nights it was the thought of Purgatory which chiefly occupied her mind. "Oh, how shall we ever bear the privation of the beauty of God after having once seen Him, and yet it will be a blessing to be in Purgatory. But pray that it may not be for a long time." She often dwelt on that subject. "I do implore of you," she said, "not to go and say that I am good, and call me a Saint when I am dead. Pray for me a great deal, and get others to pray."

When, towards the end of her life, she suffered from fever, "I am burning," she would say. "Oh, that it were with the love of God!" "Yes," her companions answered, "it is indeed with that love your heart is burning." "No," she replied, "I am too great a wretch for that, but I only wish it was so."

It pained her to give trouble in the night to the Sister who was taking care of her, and as long as she could

possibly do without her assistance she used to cry out, "I forbid you to rise." When suffering or suffocation obliged her to sit up, she moved as noiselessly as possible, in order not to awake her.

"I offered, one night, to replace her in her bed," this Sister wrote, "and lifted her up in my arms for that purpose. The next day she asked me, in a very serious and earnest manner, if it had not tired me, adding, 'It was a great relief to me.' You may imagine my answer, and with what happiness I carried her ever since backwards and forwards from her bed to her arm-chair. Three of us used to sit up with her in turn. Oh, I was so happy to do something for her, and that she allowed me to nurse her. I enjoyed this happiness for a month. It was too great a one for me. Our Lord required the sacrifice of this joy. He sent me an illness which laid me up in the infirmary, and I could not wait upon her any more. It was all over—she had died by the time I got well."

Far more than her sufferings she minded the necessity of obeying the physicians, who insisted on her having better and more delicate food than the community was in the habit of using. For a long time she objected to the least difference being made in this respect, and as long as she could crawl to the refectory, it was impossible to persuade her to eat different food to the rest of the community.

Sometimes when they provided for her some little dainties, such as fresh vegetables or early fruit, and said they were not as dear as she supposed, she would answer, "In that case get some for all the Sisters, not for me alone." She used to make over to her neighbor at table what had been prepared for her. The poor Sister who cooked for the community was often puzzled between her wish to obey the doctor and the fear of diso-

beying her Superior or deceiving her. Natalie used to detect her little tricks, and refused to avail herself of their result.

What troubled her most during her illness was the thought of increasing the expenses of the house, and she would have been really anxious on this subject if this difficulty had not been solved in an unexpected manner. We see this in the following letter:

"I should be very glad if —— [one of her relatives who was then in Paris] could help me a little to relieve the community of all the expenses entailed upon it by my illness, for the Sisters go through many privations in order to provide me with good food and other comforts. If she is kind-hearted I think she would do so. This is the only trial, of illness in a house of charity,—although nothing can exceed the good-will of the Sisters, who never seem to think there is the least difficulty about it. The poor Superior, who knows better than any one else the poverty of the community, is quite aware that without great sacrifices her poor companions cannot provide for her all the doctor orders—chicken, good broth, and other things which we are never in the habit of eating."

On this account she resisted everything done for her out of the common way. But when she became so weak that it was impossible for her to leave the infirmary, or to digest the only kind of nourishment she would allow to be procured, her last days would have been shortened, perhaps, had her orders been obeyed,—or her peace of mind troubled had they been transgressed,—but for the sudden thought of a kind friend whose affection was ever on the watch.

This was that Countess N——, who was in the habit of coming to Paris every year to see her. She was living at a distance, and ill herself, just at the moment when she would most have wished to be near Natalie. Every

day, and sometimes more than once a day, she received tidings of her health, guessed what nobody said or suspected, and wrote to a M. Rouzé, who kept a café in the Rue St. Dominique, begging him to send daily to the convent whatever delicacies the doctor ordered for Sister Narischkin. This good man had, she knew, a perfect veneration for the holy Sister of Charity, and he did acquit himself of the commission entrusted to him with the greatest zeal and care.

Natalie humbly accepted as alms the things which were thus sent to her, and thanks to her friend's thoughtful generosity her strength somewhat revived. A few days more of that precious life were vouchsafed to those who saw her with anguish drawing near to her end. This opportune assistance delivered her from a painful anxiety, and gave her physical strength to speak, and to pray up to the last moment.

The most sensible of her privations was the impossibility of going down to the chapel for Mass; but she would not, as was suggested to her, apply for permission from the Nuncio to have Mass said in her room.

"No," she answered, "when God sends us illness we must accept the sacrifices attached to it." "Oh, dear Mother!" one of her companions exclaimed when she was in one of her paroxysms of suffocation, "how I wish I was a Saint!" "What would you do then?" "I would perform a miracle, and cure you!" "But, my good Sister, it is not, you see, God's will I should be cured," Natalie quietly replied.

One day, when she was more exhausted than usual, a Sister from a distance paid her a visit, and said, "It must be very sad for you not to be able to govern your community as usual." Natalie smiled and made no reply, but when the visitor was gone she said to her companions, "It was a funny remark. If it is our Lord's will I should

be ill, it would be a pretty thing indeed for me to wish for anything else!"

In the spring of 1874, the last of her life, she heard of the illness and death of her venerable Superior, Father Etienne. This was one of the greatest afflictions which could have befallen her; but she felt so sure of soon following him that she listened to all the details of his edifying end with a calm resignation, which at another time would have cost her great effort. She felt nearer to those friends who had preceded her to heaven than to those she was leaving behind her on earth.

Her sister Catherine continually occupied her thoughts during the last months of her life. She had met with a severe accident, and was still suffering from its consequences. Natalie seemed to feel much more intensely her sister's pains than her own, and kept praying and offering up all her sufferings for her.

The close of this holy life was, however, approaching. One evening, towards the end of July, 1874, she said, "Dear Sisters, help me to die well. We can only die once;" and then pressing the crucifix to her lips, she exclaimed, "Oh, pray a great deal, and get many prayers for me, I entreat you; do not let me languish long in Purgatory."

Her constant fever, her weakness, her sleepless nights, did not for a single instant affect her serenity or the clearness of her mind. The doctor was astonished at it, and said this was scarcely ever the case in such an illness! "What a rare, beautiful organization!" he exclaimed; and indeed the most perfect harmony reigned between this pure soul, this superior mind, and that subdued and obedient body, the sufferings of which she held as nothing. In the midst of the throes of a mortal disease which consumes by degrees all the vital powers, and only deals its last blow when all has been destroyed, she

persevered not only in the accomplishment of every possible act of piety, but continued to attend to the government of her community. On the Saturday before her death she made up, as usual, the weekly accounts; and as she laid down her pen said, "I think this is for the last time."

On the 2d of August her condition became more critical. She received the last Sacraments, and in the afternoon it was for the first time supposed that she was light-headed. She spoke with some agitation of a sum of money which was missing, and imagined it was mislaid in her bed. But after a further search the money was found, and it turned out that she was quite in her right senses, and had not been anxious without reason. That day she said, looking on the side of her bed, "Oh, what a beautiful child that is!" Whether this was a vision, or a dream, or an hallucination, we cannot pretend to say. Nothing led to the belief that her faculties were in the least impaired. All that night and the following day she spoke as sensibly, as simply, and as humbly as usual, begged pardon of her companions for whatever she might have done to grieve them, thanked them all for their care of her, and with a touching solicitude, thought of every one of them individually.

On that day Father Gagarin—a Russian convert, and a Religious like herself—came to see her for the last time. Her face was so pale and transparent that she seemed no longer to belong to earth. On her brow there was a Divine peace. She was very glad to see him, and spoke in her usual manner, and with her accustomed extraordinary forgetfulness of self, not a word did she say of her own sufferings, but a great deal of those he was enduring, and which made him almost unable to walk. Those two souls sympathized in their ardent love for Russia—their common country. It was right that by the side of

Natalie's death-bed should kneel a representative of that Fatherland she so much loved. Well may it be said of her, that in imitation of our Divine Lord, "She loved her own, and loved them to the end."

Up to that time she had been consoled and assisted by M. l'Abbé Ramailhe, curé of St. Thomas D'Aquin, her own pastor and confessor, who had been better able than any one to appreciate the beneficial effects produced on all around her by the holy Sister about to die. Obligated by an imperative duty to leave her after the administration of the last Sacraments, and afraid he might never see her again, he pressed his lips on her dying hand, thus paying her beforehand, as he himself said, the homage due to the relics of Saints.

On the evening of the 4th, an unexpected consolation was vouchsafed to Natalie. The Holy Father's special blessing was brought to her by the Apostolic Nuncio. It was worded as follows:

"The Holy Father blesses the sick Sister, and prays that our Lord may give her perfect resignation, and all the consolations which she needs."

Natalie listened with clasped hands, and evident emotion and joy, to the august and paternal message thus conveyed to her. She begged to hear it read several times, and pressed the paper to her lips. On the night of the 4th, to the 5th, a severe paroxysm seemed to pre-
sage a speedy end; but she rallied again, and at four o'clock asked for water in order to wash before receiving the Blessed Eucharist, which since she had been in great danger was brought to her every day.

It was on the 5th of August, at five o'clock in the morning, that she received Holy Communion for the last time on earth.

At seven, another and still more severe paroxysm took place, and the Rev. Father Chinchon, whose guidance

and example had so powerfully assisted her to rise to a high perfection, was by her side at that moment to support and conduct her to the last solemn and blessed close of her life.

When he arrived Sister Natalie was asked if she wished to see him alone. She turned to him with a smile and said, "I have nothing more to tell you, Father." He said he would go and pray for her in the chapel. "Thank you," she said, "it will give me great pleasure." He went, but soon returned. When she saw him again, "Oh! Father," she exclaimed, "are you there? This is still an earthly consolation;" and then with the humility which to the last moment never forsook her, added, "but I am taking up too much of your time; I am not worth it." Again she asked to hear the Holy Father's words of blessing, clasped her hands together, and did not speak any more; but the expression of her countenance, as she looked at her Sisters, seemed to say, "We shall meet again in heaven; pray for me." They were all surrounding her bed, and began to recite the last prayers. . . . Before they were ended her happy soul had taken flight, and before the eyes of her poor companions there only remained her inanimate form; but on her forehead and her lips there was impressed the stamp of that heavenly bliss which was beginning for their Mother!

We cannot attempt to describe the universal desolation produced by the fatal news when it became known in Paris. It has been seen what her Sisters and her children and her poor people felt for her, but we have not, perhaps, sufficiently dwelt on the veneration she inspired to all her neighbors, to the clergy of her parish, and all that world of charity in Paris—that great world, in the right sense of the words—in which there was no heart that did not ache at the news of her death. It was as if

a heavenly vision had disappeared, as if a guardian angel had vanished from sight. Every one called to mind what a blessing her presence amongst them had been, and wondered how her loss could be supplied. Better than any words of her own could do, a letter written by one of her companions in the first hours of bereavement will show us what were the feelings of that poor little community, deprived of its loved Mother. It is written by the Sister who had nursed Natalie with such intense joy and self-devotion, but having herself fallen dangerously ill had never had the happiness of seeing her again alive. She embraced her, however, after her death, and for two days could gaze upon her mortal remains.

The following words were addressed to the faithful and loving friend who, from a distance, had so fondly provided for Natalie's wants during her illness:

"During the two days that she remained in the large room her face was so calm that it seemed to express the happiness of her departed soul. She was dressed in her habit and her cornette, and covered with flowers and garlands. A number of persons came to visit her remains, many of whom remained the whole night. It seemed so difficult to leave. Rosaries and other pious souvenirs were made to touch her body; a number of white nosegays were laid at the foot of her bed."

"On Thursday, Father Chinchon came to pray by the side of her whom in life he had so much helped to attain the place in heaven she now enjoys. He was very much overcome."

"Friday, August 7th.

"At nine o'clock she was laid in her coffin. I shall never forget how beautiful she looked. We think that God permitted this transformation. There was a bloom on her cheeks. Her hands and her whole body were

soft and pliable. She had never in life looked so lovely. She reminded us of those images of holy martyrs which are seen in Rome. Her attitude was similar—the hands crossed over each other, and her knees covered with a sheet, where a quantity of flowers were thrown. I give you all these details in order that you may picture to yourself her beauty. It was something wonderful. We could not help feeling that we were looking at a Saint. But at last the moment came to take a final leave of her, to give her a last kiss. The Sisters carried her down and placed her in the mortuary carriage of the poor. Our good curé was absent, but everything was done to honor the memory of our Mother. Good Father Chinchon was there, with a great number of Lazarist Fathers. The crowd was immense. The Mayor and the Rev. Father Mailly accompanied the body to the grave. The Sisters and the poor people followed. I felt very sad at that moment, for I was too weak to walk from the church to the cemetery, and was obliged to go home; but good Madame H—— called for me in her carriage, and drove me to the burial-place of that dear one to whom I owe everything. Father Gagarin was there. When the remains of the Mother we loved so much were consigned to the grave, our good Father stood at the head of it, with M. Mailly, M. l'Abbé Rivié, and many others. She was laid at his feet, and he remained there all the time. What were his thoughts at that moment with regard to the soul that was so dear to him? No doubt he was offering prayers for her, which will have gone straight to the Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must nevertheless go on praying for her. She used so often to say to us, 'I beseech you do not say, "She was good, she was holy," but pray for me.' I write all this to enable you to picture to yourself everything; but I add no comments. They would not be equal to your own thoughts on the subject.

“No one has been appointed in her place. An assistant Sister came to spend the day here. She was very kind to us, and said, ‘Do not expect to find another like her, for such a one does not exist.’ People at Paris can talk of nothing else. Though she saw so few persons, the beauty of her soul was well known, and the perfume of her virtues seems to have penetrated everywhere. Do you not feel now as if our Mother was nearer to you than before?—that she, as it were, surrounds you?—and that instead of writing, you can speak to her, that she hears you and can help you? I think she must have become a second guardian angel for one she loved so much, and who during her severe sufferings procured her so much relief. For my part, I cannot rise above my wretched nature, and I feel to miss her terribly.”

She was buried in the Mont Parnasse Cemetery, in the enclosure reserved for the Sisters of Charity. But as this space is, alas! too small to enable them all to remain there, Natalie’s family and friends obtained leave to transport her—some time afterwards—to a separate tomb. They chose a spot, the nearest they could find to the Sisters’ Cemetery. A little white marble monument, surmounted by a Greek cross, marks the place where Sister Natalie rests. Often and often people kneel before her tomb, and bring flowers and garlands to adorn it. And we can say, as did one of the keepers of the cemetery, on the day when an immense crowd of Parisians of every rank followed with tears her humble funeral, “Oh, how good that Sister must have been, to make people love her so much!”

Such was Natalie Narischkin from her childhood to her last day. Her life was like one of those musical strains, true and harmonious from the first, weak at the outset, which go on increasing, deepening, and rising

evermore in tone and in melody, until they have stirred the heart, and filled the whole atmosphere with their pervading sweetness.

But that other strain, more beautiful than any earthly one, "more worthy of homage than even the voice of genius"—that Divine melody which emanates from a holy soul—will the faintest echo of that Divine music be found in these pages? Will they console and rejoice some of those who were acquainted with Sister Natalie, and who knew the beauty of her soul? Will they make others appreciate her? Will they lead her kindred to exult in the holy fame she has attached to their name, and the land of her birth, which she so much loved, to venerate her memory? We dare not trust that such will be the result of our labors, for a sense of our deficiencies never struck us more forcibly than now when we have brought them to a close. But we venture to indulge that hope, for we have asked God to bless our work, and on Him alone we rely.



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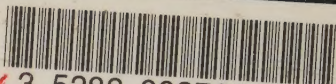
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